

THE VOICE OF THE MIDDLE WEST

An abstract of a dissertation
by

Ralph Speer

August 1977

Drake University

Advisor: Hilary Masters

The Voice of the Middle West is a novel about a deaf man named Claude Hunter Jr. Hunter's life is traced from infancy to age 30, 1933-1963. The setting is a small southern Iowa town called Calliope and moves occasionally to the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines. Claude is raised by foster parents, Peter and Rachel Benjamin. Peter is the minister of Calliope Christian Church.

The novel also deals with radio station WHY, a Des Moines station which goes on the air in 1933. Of particular interest is a broadcaster Clay Brooks, a native of Calliope.

The Voice of the Middle West is a novel which has been a long time in the writing. It began with a love for radio. Much of my own life is in the novel for I was a foster child and I grew up in two small Iowa towns. My experience working at the State Fair and as a Christian Church minister is also important.

But the key factor is the awareness of deafness which my wife brought to me. Because she is an interpreter, we have many deaf friends and it was crucially important that my lead character be real, that he be meaningful and human. This above all else was my goal in writing.

Of nearly equal importance to me was the creation of a significant and real "place." Iowa is a great mystical mother; I want her to be portrayed accurately, her people to be real.

Of those writers who influenced my thinking in preparing this novel, I feel most indebted to William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, Harper Lee and William Styron.

It is Eliot's Wasteland which sets my philosophical mood. The deaf person in our age is still trapped in Eliot's Wasteland. He is trapped because our generation has not learned, as Eliot suggests, to give, sympathize, and control ourselves in regard to this handicap.

Faulkner taught me love of place. I've travelled all over his mythical county, talked to the models of his characters, and studied how he matched the word to the place.

He taught me how to love my place in writing, and I want to keep practicing this art.

Harper Lee taught me how to explore children's minds and how to be poetic without overdoing it. I'm eager to do more work with this word craft, too.

Styron was both a positive and negative influence upon me. I loved Lie Down in Darkness because I thought he performed an extension of Faulkner and Eliot. In some ways, this book was an attempt to do likewise. But I was offended by his negative attitude toward modern religion, and I wanted to present a more positive picture.

In summary, it is most difficult to sit in judgment of one's own work. Sometimes I feel like Ann Bradstreet who referred to her book of poems as "my rambling brat in print."

The book is mine, and I am proud of it, but the best lesson I learned from it is that I must now write another. I simply must, and I shall. I discovered that I could write while teaching and taking classes, and now I propose to do just that, again and again.

THE VOICE OF THE MIDDLE WEST
(A Novel)

A Dissertation
Presented to
The School of Graduate Studies
Drake University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Arts

by
Ralph H. Speer
August, 1977

1977
Sp 32

THE VOICE OF THE MIDDLE WEST

by
Ralph H. Speer

Approved by Committee:

Hily Minter
Chairman

Arthur C. Sage

John A. Hines

Bruce G. Campbell

Dale Miller

Frank L. Canfield
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

1977
Sp 32

Lackey

THE VOICE OF THE MIDDLE WEST

by

Ralph H. Speer

Approved by Committee:

Hilary Masters
Chairman

Curtis C. Page

James S. Duncan

Bruce G. Campbell

Dale Miller

Earle L. Canfield
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

"The voice of the poet lives forever."

Robert Frost

All characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

Claude Hunter Jr. stood at the top of the Household of God prayer tower and looked out over the city of Des Moines, Iowa. He ran from one side to the other, leaning as far as the protective railing would let him. He stared far into the distance and watched the orange ball of sunset collide with the gold domes of Iowa's capital building. He watched the lights of the city as they started to blink on.

Then Claude himself stood bathed in light, the flickering red light of the huge neon cross above his head. He watched it blink off, and smiled in remembrance as the huge red JESUS SAVES lights blinked on just above him. He pointed and leaped, trying to touch the letters.

"Da," he said, "Da, Da, Da."

He leaped and shouted, running around and around the tower, straining to touch the bright red JESUS SAVES.

Far below him on the lawn of the church a black and white border collie imitated his actions. She ran to the base of the prayer tower, whimpered and scratched to gain entrance, then ran back to a point on the lawn where she could see Claude's antics. She barked, she howled, she whimpered again. She bounced in excited little leaps, wagging her tail in both anger and joy. She sat back on her haunches, letting the great tail sweep the lawn in excited and exaggerated arches. Then she bounced forward for all the world as if she had cornered a squirrel. She leaned far forward on her paws, twisting her neck and eyes upward to the blinking red tower.

She moved and danced upon the lawn, crying out with every motion for the attention of her master on the tower. Finally the boy saw her, his eyes growing large with the beauty of her demonstration of affection and the great distance between them. He felt a great surge of pride rise up in his chest and with all of the exuberation of an eleven year old he pulled the stocking cap from his bald head and waved it in the wind as a sign of recognition for the dog.

"Kluh," he shouted, straining every muscle in his happiness.

"Kluh, Kluh, Kluh."

He danced around and around the cross, red light gleaming from his bald head. He waved and waved to the dog below. Neither seemed mindful of the bitter cold wind which shook the tower and clawed at the bare fringe of the trees at the edge of the lawn. The boy was aware only of this lofty position, the dog worshipping his every move, and the distant awe of the growing darkness.

The dog was so entranced by his master's antics that he was scarcely aware of the approach of a crowd of carolers who brought their message of cheer to the Household of God. The youngsters, wrapped in scarves and mackinaws and furry mittens were returning from a late afternoon visit to various homes in the area, delivering baskets of fruit and pastries to unfortunate families and shut-ins and bringing cheer into lonely hearts by repeating the age old carols of Christmas. Now they returned, in this Saturday sunset before Christmas,

to sing to the preacher and his wife and their guests.

The Reverend Audie Whispers rushed to the door, hugging, greeting and welcoming the singers. Despite his demonstration of affection and genuinely sound backslapping, all of the members of the chorus managed to continue singing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Audie's wife Hope ran to the kitchen to fetch her guests: Reverend and Mrs. Peter Benjamin.

The two women hurried to the living room to hear the carolers, but Peter Benjamin lingered in the kitchen, listening to an interview on radio station WHY. Peter couldn't tear himself away from the magnetism of the voice. He edged toward the sound of the carols, half of him wanting to be a proper guest, half of him wanting to gloat over the sound of radio power. He stood transfixed, moving one foot and then the other, halfway between the kitchen and the living room of the parsonage. It was as if "Silent Night" filled one half of his mind and the fifty thousand watt clear channel voice of the Middle West filled the other. Finally as the youthful voices blended into "We Wish You a Merry Christmas", Peter slipped into the living room.

When the song was ended Audie Whispers seemed to be everywhere at once. His blue eyes twinkled with merriment and ego satisfaction. He patted, he slapped, he joked; he shepherded his young flock into many introductions.

"I tell you, Peter," he said, his voice growing tremulous, "The Lord has truly blessed this church. Give us just another year or two and we'll be the biggest church in Iowa." The

pride shone like angel's wings in his eyes.

"You deserve that honor, Audie. I can't name another preacher in this state who has worked so hard, spent so many hours in prayer and labor and exhortation as you. And that radio broadcast on WHY hasn't hurt anything either..."

Peter had more to say, but Audie cut him off with a warning finger.

"No, Peter, you're wrong. My labors have had very little to do with the success of the work here." His voice reached the level of persuasion which he normally reserved only for the final statements of a Sunday morning sermon. "This church has grown because of the wonder working Providence of God, and for no other reason. God wants a praying, God believing, miracle working church here in the capital city of Iowa. Right here with its giant prayer tower next to the state fairgrounds. I'll give you one little example."

Nobody walked and talked like Audie Whispers. He was one constant exuberant evangelistic sermon. The tail of his coat bounced up and down as he walked. Most people had to trot to keep up with his normal walking speed. He danced across the room to where one of the bright eyed little girls sat tugging at the strings of her mittens. He gathered her up in one sweeping motion, untying her troublesome knot as he carried her back to his friends.

"This is Nancy." He paused for a moment and brushed the small girl's bangs with a hand that seemed too big to preach with. "Little Nancy and her family came to church one Sunday

evening. We didn't have a special service or anything. I'd just been preaching about the miracles of Jesus, and I'd started to sing the invitation hymn when this little four year old tyke came limping down the aisle. Nancy came up to me, and held out her little arms for me to hold her. The audience kept right on singing, and I picked Nancy up and asked why she had come. She said, "Mr. Whispers I want you to heal me just like Jesus healed the little girl in the Bible story. I have to walk funny, and I can't run and play like the other boys and girls."

Audie put the little girl down, stepping back and looking at her, much as he must have done that night. Then he continued the story.

"I asked everybody in the audience to pray. I held Nancy in my arms, looked her in the eyes and said 'Nancy, you go back to your mother.' I put her down. She didn't limp, she didn't walk, she ran." The words raced; the eyes twinkled.

"That's why I'm convinced that God wants His household right here at East 30th and Walnut in Des Moines, Iowa. I'd never dreamed that God wanted me to be the agent of healing, but it has happened time and time again. I'll keep on doing what he wants."

Then as suddenly as he had begun the story, he dropped it, rushing to gather up children in both arms as he tugged them toward the door. "Come on, boys and girls, there's hot chocolate and cookies waiting for our carolers in the

fellowship hall of the Household of God."

Peter and Rachel watched while Audie and Hope herded the boisterous carolers out the door and onto the lawn which sloped down toward the massive brick church. It had started to snow.

"Did you hear Clay Rush on the news?" Peter asked, his eyes racing around the kitchen and settling on the radio.

"Yes, I heard him," Rachel said. "It was a little strange wasn't it. Almost like he was an angel of God or something. He sounded so strong, so forceful. But I couldn't help remembering when he was such an ornery little red head in my first Sunday School class in Calliope. There were times then when I wished he was on the radio so I could shut him off."

"I know what you mean. I can recall Emory taking him out of church a few times because he wouldn't stop fidgeting and whispering. I have the feeling that his bottom was as red as his hair when he came back in. By the way, where's Claude? He hasn't been here for half an hour or so."

"Oh, I'm sure he's out romping with Claw. You know how he loves to run on the fairgrounds with that dog. They haven't seen each other since Thanksgiving. It's good for him. They have a special kind of communion here on these fairgrounds. There's lots of room to run. I never worry when Claude's with Claw. The dog always comes whenever I call either of their names, and Claude always comes, too. It's like he can hear through the dog."

"I don't know about him off romping through the fair-grounds when it's this late, though, " said Peter. "It's dark out there. We'd better call them in."

Audie and the carolers were just entering the church door when Rachel stepped to the back steps of the parsonage to call the dog.

"Claw,: she called, her voice resounding and echoing against the brick wall. "Here Claw, here Claw, come on home boy." Audie stopped to listen. Then he spotted the dog, dancing and bristling at the base of the prayer tower. "Over here, Rachel, " he called, and Peter and Rachel ran through the snow, tugging at coats and hats as they ran.

The dog ran to the minister and his wife with tail wagging and body swaying. Se was a very obedient dog and had great love for her family. Her whole body picked up the momentum of love, and the flag of love exhibited by her tail was not enough for her emotions. Her throat was filled with little growls and whimpers of love. But her greeting was brief, she ran a few steps away, and arched her neck so that she could see the figure on the prayer tower. Then she barked with a hoarse exuberance.

All of the carolers had now gathered with Audie and Hope in a little semi-circle surrounding Peter, Rachel and the dog. They all stared at the boy on the tower, dancing and leaping beneath the b linking cross, trying to touch the JESUS SAVES. The snow flakes had grown large and fluffy and the boy on the tower seemed like something far away and

shadowy, but yet very real, like voices from far away on the radio. When the cross blinked on, the snowflakes fell in pink cross-like streams and the bald boy moved in and out of their flow like a traffic cop controlling and directing their progress. When the cross blinked off and the JESUS SAVES blinked on, Claude was the director of a symphony of pink snowflakes. He moved here and there, blending them all together in a chorus of angelic love. He waved his stocking cap like a limp baton. Then he came to the edge of the railing and peered into the blur of white night. He saw the semi-circle of viewers and was at first awe-stricken by his gallery. Then he saw Peter and Rachel move out from the arc with his dog, and he shouted his proclamation of recognition.

"Kluh, Kluh, Kluh." Then he paused.

"Datta, Damayata, Datta, Damayata." He repeated the names over and over in his glee. He danced and waved his cap. His bald head occasionally reflected the pink glow of the cross. Then he paused dramatically, sweeping his arms to the cross above him to make sure his viewers understood.

"Luuck, luuck, luuck, luuck," he shouted, sweeping his arm again and again to the cross above him. "Da," he called. "Da, Da, Da, Da, Da." His voice bounced and rebounded across the lawn.

"What's he saying?" asked little Nancy, her eyes wide with the wonderment of the scene. "Does he talk another language?"

Audie pulled her close and lifted her into his arms as

if she were a baby. "He's deaf, Nancy; Claude is deaf. He can't speak like we do. But I think he's trying to tell his mother and father about the light on the cross that says JESUS SAVES. He wants them to see it."

Peter was already inside the tower, climbing the steps. It was cold in the tower, but the steps were protected from wind and snow. Near the top the metal steps grew steep like those of a ladder and Peter wished he had brought his gloves as he clung to the cold metal rungs.

Rachel stood in the arc of pink light, trying desperately to make Claude understand her statements of fear and warning. Her hand moved rapidly and violently as she sought to communicate through the distance and the snow. But she realized as Claude replied to her that he could understand only a semblance of what she was saying; he was too exhilarated by his position and thrilled by the experience to obey her commands. She watched as Peter climbed onto the lookout point with the boy.

Claude raced around and around the base of the cross, pointing and laughing, sharing his glee with Peter. The minister stretched to touch the base of the J on JESUS SAVES. He lifted the boy so he could feel the neon sign and pulled him away when he tugged at the S on SAVES. He walked with Claude to the city side of the tower and stared into the blur of snow and light which was the city. He thought he could make out the capital dome in the fuzzy distance.

The minister placed his arm around the boy's shoulder as

they looked back down to the spot where the crowd of carolers now started to drift back into the building. He saw Rachel and Claw. The boy waved his stocking cap and shouted. "Damayata, Damayata, Kluh, luuck, luuck, Datta, Datta, Datta," and he threw his arms around the man who was the only father he had ever known. "Datta, Datta, Datta, " he shouted, leaving the cross to blink its message of salvation to the snowy night.

Peter held his arm around the boy and walked to the side of the tower which looked out over the hilly grounds of the Iowa State Fair. He could see the barns and exhibition halls standing like huge hulking shadowy figures behind the fuzzy screen of snow. Beyond the final hill of the grounds he saw a blinking red radio tower light, the marker for station WHY. He stared, fascinated by the message of light in the night. He held the boy close to his side, pondering the magnetic fascination of the lights. His towering vantage point possessed its own power. The JESUS SAVES floated out over his head, a banner of bright red security. He followed the light as it twisted into the night, across the grounds, seemingly in a magnetic line to the red glow of the WHY tower. A message, silent, forceful, mechanistic floated through the blanket of snow on its way to the ground. Waves and waves of silent sound flickered and filtered through the snow. Peter felt the message, felt it throbbing in his body like an Old Testament prophecy, but he could not speak its syllables; he was not even sure that the message could be spoken.

It was something about towers and powers and silence and sounds and waves and waves of time and people and light. He glanced up again to the message gleaming bright and secure in the night above his head. "JESUS SAVES," The tower blinked. "Jesus saves," Peter said and hugged the boy again.

"Da," said Claude, pointing to the cross. "Da, Da, Da." There were tears in his eyes. He was shivering. "Datta, Datta," he cried, and he pulled himself close to Peter's chest. He looked down onto the lawn where Rachel stood alone now; she was staring into the distance where Rachel stood alone now; she was staring into the distance where the WHY tower blinked its somber message of warning.

"Damayata," he cried. He climbed down the metal rungs. Peter followed close behind.

Hope Whispers bustled about her kitchen, preparing breakfast for the Benjamins before they drove back to Calliope. She moved her skillets across the blue flame, flipping the eggs with a wooden handled metal spatula. The sausage sizzled, popped, and squirmed on the hot black metal. The odors of breakfast sifted through the entire house.

Hope glanced out the frosty window as a female cardinal swooped in for a morning meal at the bird feeder arranged on the window sill. She watched it fly back to its bright red mate, perched jauntily on the cross at the peak of the prayer tower. She smiled and hummed a Christmas carol about herald angels. She flipped the sizzling sausage patties, and breathed deep to suck in the whole aroma of their transition. She loved their cozy brick parsonage house. She loved her preacher

healer husband whose fame was growing every day, and she loved showing off her loves to good friends like the Benjamins who brought their foster deaf child Claude to visit every weekend before Christmas. They picked the boy up at the State School for the Deaf at Council Bluffs, and stopped by Des Moines for shopping and visiting on the way back to Calliope. The two couples were especially close since Hope's uncle was an elder in the church in Calliope, and Audie had recommended the Benjamin's for the pulpit duties there more than ten years ago, during the depression. Calliope was the only other church where Audie had served in the pulpit before coming to Des Moines. Both men had graduated from tiny Central Bible College in Joplin, Missouri. Rachel, Audie and Peter were all Missourians. Only Hope was from Iowa. Des Moines was her home town.

Her reverie was broken when Rachel Benjamin came into the kitchen, tying an apron round her waist. She stooped down to kiss her friend. Then she hurried to the cupboard, opened the ornate brass latch and started pulling out plates and saucers and bowls for their accustomed place at the Whispers' kitchen table.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing smells better than sausage and eggs on a cold December morning. And it never smells better than in your kitchen, Hope. I swear you're a better cook than my mother and Tina Pinegar put together."

"There will be no lying in my kitchen," Hope snapped, trying not to sound pleased. "No swearing either, if you

please. The very idea of a minister's wife swearing in my kitchen. And I know how Tina Pinegar can cook. I lived in Calliope, too, you know."

"Nonetheless, Hope you outdo yourself when we come by. We never eat like this in Calliope. If Peter and Claude get oatmeal or Cream of Wheat for breakfast they're lucky. More often it's a piece of toast. Of course, I do cook a little more when Claude is home for the holidays. He's used to hot meals at the school."

Hope took the hot sausages from the skillet, sliding them carefully onto the large white towel to absorb the left over grease. She paused a long moment, long enough for Rachel to wonder at her thoughts.

"Is something wrong, Hope?"

Still Hope said nothing. She turned the sausages over on the cloth, and stared at the playful cardinals on the prayer tower.

She carefully placed each fried egg on a towel, turned off each burner of the stove, and waited for the little pop that told her the gas was safe. All Thermogas stoves did that, it was kind of a trademark of safety. She was curious about Claude, but she didn't want to hurt Rachel's feelings. She knew the story of the boy, how Rachel had rescued him from a flaming wreckage in which both his parents died. It was on the Fourth of July, 1933. She knew, too, that Rachel and Peter had taken the boy as a foster child rather than adopt him, because that had been the dying wish of his father.

But there were so many things she didn't know, and she wanted to know, but she would never dare hurt her friend's feelings.

That's the real treachery of friendship, she thought. You skate on such dangerous ice, especially if you're a preacher's wife. You can't have friends in the congregation, real friends that is. If you're too friendly you destroy your husband's credibility or some folks will think you're playing favorites, and there will be unnecessary jealousies. There are already plenty of those. A friend like Rachel is so precious. It's nice to be able to share important, intimate things with someone; that's the biggest thing a preacher and his wife miss. But you can't risk losing your one best friend by saying the wrong thing. Still I am so curious.

Rachel kept herself busy by arranging the table and calling the men in to eat. When everybody sat down to eat, Rachel interpreted the blessing to Claude, who sat with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on his mother. Hope held her hands to her eyes and peeked like a small child. She couldn't help it. She was fascinated with Rachel's ability to communicate with the child. Audie dominated the conversation during breakfast, telling of the plans he had for the coming year.

Rachel and Hope gathered dishes and took them to the sink. Hope pulled her dishpan from under the sink and grabbed a dishrag from the rack over the sink. She plunged it into the hot sudsing water; she was still afraid to talk to Rachel. But Rachel had waited long enough.

"What's wrong Hope? You're as quiet as the board

chairman when Peter asks for a raise. Usually you and Audie have a contest to see who can say the most in the least amount of time. I hope you don't have lockjaw before Christmas. That would be terrible."

"Oh, Rachel, I don't know what's wrong with me. It's just that I'm afraid of hurting your feelings. I can't talk about anything but Claude, because he's been on my mind so much since last night. But I don't want you to feel bad. That's why I haven't been able to say anything. All of us become deaf or dumb now and then when we're afraid of hurting someone by talking when we shouldn't. That's all."

Rachel took her turn at staring out the window at the prayer tower. She watched blue jays flit and tease each other in the row of pine trees next to the fairground fence. She saw a nuthatch wind his backwards way down a dying elm tree whose bark yielded an ample supply of hidden insects for winter meals. Rachel was a long time speaking. She weighed her words as she weighed the plates in her hand, dabbing at her thoughts as she dabbed the dishtowel against the wet spots on the backs of the dishes.

"You're right, you know, Hope. We all live in a silent world more than we realize. It's only when we have to try to enter and communicate with the world of silence that we have problems. We're so used to exploding our emotions with these voices of ours that we seldom think about the wonderful silent times that we share together or that we treasure alone. That's part of what I've learned from Claude, and I'm still learning everyday. I know that he teaches me more than I can

ever teach him. That's part of the reason why we send him to the state school. It seems a little cruel for him to have to be so far away from home, and all the things that most boys and girls have in family life, but his world is so different, and Peter and I can't really reach into the place where he lives. It's so quiet, so hidden, so removed. He's much happier being with others who know his world, who share his silent world. But more important, he's learning. His mind is growing. He knows so much more than any of us think. And you really find it out when you just sit and quietly share his world."

The dishes were finished. Hope stacked and arranged them. Rachel sorted and arranged the silverware in the drawer. Hope spoke quietly.

"I hope you didn't punish Claude for going up on the prayer tower without letting you know."

"No," Rachel spoke again in measured words, carefully sorting the words, trying and fitting each one before she spoke them.

"No. If he were a hearing child, I would surely have punished him. But he was embarking on a spiritual experience in that tower. He found something there that was very precious. He wasn't just playing. He was worshipping.

"But what was he doing; what was he saying? It's almost like little Nancy said, that he was speaking another language."

"Nancy was right, you know," said Rachel. She tugged at

her long brown hair and stroked it out into little strands on her shoulder. She continued to fondle it in an idle sort of habitual contemplation.

"It is a different language, " she continued, "a beautiful, picturesque, colorful language that most of us mortals are not privileged to use. I sometimes wonder if it isn't the language of God; if angels don't speak in signs. The language of the silent world is much more beautiful, much less restricted, much more poetic than ours. They speak with their whole being, with the entire thought process. We speak in the limited symbols of our particular cultural system. The deaf are not so limited. They live outside our world, and learn a more universal language. Most people still consider them stupid or inferior. Actually they are living in a world above ours, above all the restrictions of language and noise, a much cleaner, happier world, but a much more lonely place to be. Only the parents of deaf children, the families and friends, the people who work closely, come to realize the beauty and the terror of their world. And sometimes even we don't see, don't comprehend what is really going on there. So you see, your question is good for me. I spend all my spare moments thinking about Claude's world, wondering, speculating, substituting in my mind. I need to talk about it, need to share it. You certainly don't hurt my feelings to ask me about Claude. I need to talk, mostly to someone like you."

Hope brushed back her hair, and stood on her tiptoes to

glance at her face in the little mirror which hung from the window casing. She and Audie once did constant battle with that mirror. He tipped it up. She tipped it down. He often came into the kitchen to ask her opinion; he would always end up by the sink, staring out at the prayer tower. Then he examined himself in the mirror. She no longer tipped the mirror down. She stretched to find her face at his level.

"But what does he say? What does he mean Da, Da, Da? Is he calling Peter? Is it like a baby learning to talk? Why is his speech so foreign, so broken?"

"All he's trying to do," Rachel said "is put his feelings into words, but words are very foreign things to him. He sees other people's mouths moving. He knows they communicate by their mouths, but he cannot begin to comprehend the complexity of that system. Slowly, methodically, the deaf person learns to speak a few words that sound like those of the hearing person's speech. But he does it out of bravery, and sheer desire to communicate. If he is totally deaf like Claude is, he has absolutely no way of knowing what he has spoken unless some hearing person can communicate to him on paper or by sign that he has succeeded or failed in communicating. It's not much like a hearing baby learning to talk because a baby hears over and over the proper sounds to mimic. The deaf person has only a feeling in his throat, and a curvature of his lips. It is not at all unusual for a deaf person of Claude's age to have a very limited vocabulary. In fact, most deaf persons have very poor vocabularies as adults, even

after they have learned the knack or reading. Our spoken language is, of course, the basis for our written language, so a great many of our symbols in writing are wasted on the deaf, and reading is a very difficult task to master."

Hope draped the dish towels over the three pronged rack at the edge of the sink basin. She pulled the drain plug and watched the water twist into a little whirlpool.

"But what does DA, DA, DA, DA mean?" she said. "That has been bothering me ever since he shouted it out from the tower. I guess I'd never really heard him speak before, never expected him to. But he sounded so excited when he said DA, Da, Da, Da. It must be very important to him."

She reached behind her back and untied the knot in her apron; Rachel mimiced her actions, as if she were an automatic device, set to do exactly as her friend had done. Hope folded her apron and tucked it in a drawer. Rachel walked behind, her mind spinning with thoughts, her hands following Hope's pattern. She closed the drawer.

"It really is important, Hope, It's a new word to me, too. But I think he has invented that word for God, That's why he kept wanting to touch the cross and the letters of JESUS SAVES on the tower. He's heard, through my translating, of God and Jesus, and Jesus dying on the cross. He's read it in his Bible. He knows that Peter and Audie are preachers, so when he discovered that blinking light so high in the air and the cross blinking on and off above it, he made an association with God. It was his way of coming to

grips with the symbol. He was ecstatic about it, and he wanted to share his joy with everybody else. I think that he thinks that God, or DA as he puts it, lives there. He felt something very special, very real on that tower. Maybe he knows more than we do. Peter said he felt it too when he went up to get him, a very special kind of power, not from the height, not even from the symbol of the tower, but a kind of magnetic fascination with power far beyond the human. Peter said he wanted to shout out Da, Da, Da too, but he didn't want anyone to think he was making fun of Claude.

Hope was intrigued, probably more intrigued than she had ever been by anything but Audie in her whole life.

"Those other words," Hope said. "Are they names for you and Peter? Is he trying to say Daddy and Mommy" Is he calling his dog?"

Beneath the counter top there were more cupboards. Hope kept canned goods there, and she reached, now, far into the shelf for the two pound tin of Folger's coffee. She hated the stuff, but Audie loved it, so she kept a fresh pot perking often. But she shoved the can far back on the shelf as her personal symbol of distaste.

Hope opened the lid, and the aroma came leaping into the room like march music on the radio set, Rachel stood with both arms braced on the window sill. She stared out at the fairgrounds.

"Yes, those are our pet words, our love words. He repeats them over and over because he knows that they make us

happy. At first I tried to get him to say Mommy. I worked at it, trying not to get angry. But he calls me Damyata, always, always Damyata, and Peter is Datta, never Dada, Daddy or Dad, always Datta. I have no idea where the sounds come from, or how he found them or lodged them in his memory. But they are there and they are permanent. I will always be Damyata. It feels right in his throat. And it feels right in my heart, too. I treasure the sound. It is very special. And he has a very special feeling for his dog. We named him Claw so he would come when we called Claude's name. It works beautifully. Claude relates to the dog, tells him things with his eyes and his touch which are either above or below our level of comprehension. I honestly think that they can read each other's thoughts. But when he calls Claw it is always the same, never a variance in pitch, never a change in sound, always, always the same: Kluh, Kluh, Kluh. It's a love word, too, and the dog understands. It's as if he has two names. If we call him Kluh instead of Claw, he won't respond. But he always comes running when we call him by his right name or if we call for Claude. That's why I don't worry when they are out running together in Calliope or even up here on the fairgrounds."

Claude came into the kitchen, the border collie trailing close behind his heels. He was bundled for the weather, his red and blue stocking cap pulled snugly over his ears, a big blue scarf wrapped loosely about his neck.

"Damyata," he spoke with precision. "Damyata, luuck,

luuck, Datta, Datta." He tugged and pulled, trying to get his mother to the doorway. He pointed to the driveway.

"Datta, Datta," he said.

Hope and Rachel both laughed, and both wondered if they should have. There standing beside the green Chevrolet Sedan was Peter, all packed and ready for the trip to Calliope. Everything was in the car except the family. And Claude was ready to go home.

CHAPTER TWO

By noon the Benjamins had travelled out of the rich fertile basin of Iowa's mid section. They climbed the long tedious clay hills, and gasped occasionally at the rough hewn beauty of hickory and oak valleys. The depression had been rough on southern Iowa. Everywhere there were deserted farm homes and tumbledown barns which once were proud lifetime possessions and family incomes for thousands. Of course, farming in southern Iowa was never easy. But new money after the depression was in the cities and the country towns in the midst of the rich fertile corn belt up state from Calliope. The clay soil of southern Iowa and northern Missouri raised poor corn. About all it was good for was hay and oats. The farmers of this region were stock feeders and grazers. They raised cattle and/or sheep and a few hogs. They turned the cattle loose on the rough clay pastures and hickory slopes where they might find grass. Then they struggled through the icy winters, slipping and sliding through the feed lots dragging bales and stacks of hay and straw.

But many of them didn't make it through the depression. The meat market was down; narrow profits were even more narrow. Local banks went under. The bank of Calliope stood like a decaying brick ghost, a horrible reminder of the calamity of the early thirties. Nobody wanted the building. Nobody bothered it. It just stood in the middle of the little town, its windows caked with dust, its window shades fading and

and curling with the passing of years and the lack of care. It was as if the spirit of the town, of the region, had lived and dwelt in the bank. The people would not change it, hoping that someday the old ways would return, the old prosperity would come back as it had in other places. But the good times were not coming back to southern Iowa. The old bank, with its dirty sad face simply grew older and decayed just a bit more every day. So did the deserted farms. So did the families who stayed struggling against the odds of success, making the most of their situations, knowing and trying to forget that those who got out, who went to the cities, or to the richer grain farms had found a new prosperity. Each day they grew stubborn in their love for the land and for each other, mistrusting any signs of prosperity or any newcomer to their region, and they both loved and hated the deserted empty banks of Calliope and a hundred other southern Iowa towns. They were poor dirt farmers, proud of who they were, even why they were, and they were not about to change. They were as sturdy as the oaks in their feedlots, as hardy and unchanging as their clay hills.

And in their living rooms or in their kitchens, sometimes around a dining room table, they gathered for the noon day news on radio station WHY. They listened to the farm reports of Herb Hedges, and they knew by the way he spoke that he was himself a farm boy. They listened to blond haired Jack Rhiner with his reports from around the world, and they knew that the voice of authority was right there in their homes, sharing

the noon day meal with them, just like one of the hired hands. Everybody in southern Iowa listened, and sometimes they repeated the funny mistakes or the clever commercials or the cute little jingles while they fed the cows, or threw down the hay or cut the wood to stave off the bitter winter cold. They listened, they listened very carefully, and they expected everybody else to listen, too. Of course, nobody had to encourage Peter Benjamin to listen. It was his favorite hobby. He was in love with radio, had been since his parents bought the first chrystal set in Adrian, Missouri when he was a boy. They brought it home from Kansas City, and he sat staring in wonderment which still overcame him every time he turned the radio on.

Betsy Burns gave her recipe club, and helpful hints every day at 11:30, just prior to the noonday news. She signed off the air just now, wishing all of her listeners a very merry Christmas, and hoping that all their families could be together, at least in spirit during this sad time of war. She said she prayed for all the boys who were serving their country in foreign lands and awaited herself the safe return of her son who was serving in Paris at this very hour.

The Benjamins were driving through Leon at the moment of her message and Rachel Benjamin tugged open a bulky purse, fumbling for a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes, and glanced at Peter.

"That's so sad," she said. "War is such a terrible thing. Especially at Christmas."

"It's hard to sing Peace on Earth and Mercy Mild and think about Hitler and Mussolini and all of those innocent boys dying," Peter said. "It's hard to think about, especially when you see these run-down farms and people like the Ellises with all of their boys away in some foreign country shooting at boys from run-down farms back home. I don't know. I can't come to grips with it. I try, but I can't. I guess I'm glad just to be in Calliope, even if times are bad."

Claude watched his parents talking. He knew it was important. He could tell by their eyes. His mother was crying. He hated that, but he didn't know what to do about it. He stared at the car radio. It was hard to see the little glowing lights in the day time; he liked it better at night when he could read the numbers and watch the little glowing light. He touched the radio and held his hand there a long time, feeling the pulsation of sound, wondering at its strangeness. It felt almost like the cat at the school that he sneaked into his room each night. They don't have a radio at school, he thought, but then, we don't have a cat at home. They both feel a lot alike, except the radio doesn't have fur and the cat doesn't have glowing lights, except sometimes when it's very dark and I'm in bed and the cat is sleeping in my chair and she hears a noise. Then the cat's eyes are like the dial on the radio. They glow and shine. I think the radio is alive, too. Sometimes it makes Datta and Damyata happy, sometimes they laugh and laugh. But

other times they cry, like now. Sometimes I feel that way about my cat, especially when I don't see her for a long time. I cry too. Sometimes I'm so happy that tears come out, like when I see Klueh when I come home for Tahnksgiving or Christmas. Maybe that's why Danyata is crying. She hasn't seen me at home for a long time and it's Christmas."

Claude reached up and tugged at his mother's hand. He pulled her face toward his and kissed her. Then very carefully he spelled out on his hands the message he had practiced over and over again at school.

In his excitement he spelled "MARY CHRISTMAS MOTHER." His eyes were shining with pride and love. She hugged the boy tightly, her eyes brimming with joy. He pulled away from her embrace and tugged at his father's sleeve, anxious to please him, too. But Peter was perplexed. For one thing he had never really learned the signs and knew only a few awkward gestures of love. He didn't want to hurt the boy, but he couldn't read signs and drive at the same time, so he turned to Rachel in desperation. Rachel caught Claude's attention and signed the message that Daddy couldn't look away from his driving. "Tell me, instead," she signed, "and I'll relay the message to Daddy."

Claude's hands quivered with excitement. These were big moments for him. Claw squirmed in the back seat, and barked with his own excitement.

MERY CRISTMAS FATER, the boy spelled and he waited with great glee for his father's reaction. Peter smiled broadly taking his right arm away from the wheel to squeeze the boy in a bear-like embrace.

They drove on, mostly in silence, as Rachel sought to explain her tears to Claude. They had talked about the war before, as had the teachers at the school in Council Bluffs. Still the whole concept of huge numbers of people killing each other was too great for the boy to grasp. He tried, he honestly tried, but the whirl of words and signs in his head was too great, and he turned from the conversation to watch the procession of tree and hill and snow and ice outside his window. He buttoned the top button of his coat and shivered. He climbed into the back seat of the Chevrolet. He snuggled close to Claw and stroked his fur.

Peter and Rachel listened quietly as Herb Hedges gave special Christmas interviews from the European Battle Front. Herb was talking to Iowa farm boys who were in the midst of the action of the battle. There was loneliness in their voices, and agony. Sometimes there were tears in voices, flowing down the faces and into the microphones and across the miles and miles of ocean, flowing directly into the '38 Chevrolet on its way home to Calliope, flowing directly into the coal-stoved livingrooms of thousands of Iowa farms, warming and stirring and wetting the souls of all who heard. And the voices, the constant boyish voices were not changed because they were so many miles away in such horrible circumstances, they were still the farmboy voices of the middle west, tense, frightened, trying to sound strong. But the voices all wanted to be back, back in the '38 Chevrolets, the shabby barns, the little feed mills, the hickory timbers.

The voices wanted to come home for Christmas, and forever. Some of them never would.

Claude loved oyster soup. They never had yummy things like that in the school. They had all the regular things that are supposed to make boys and girls strong and healthy, but never anything exciting and exotic like oyster soup. Besides that, Damyata didn't like oysters, she only fixed them because Datta and Claude like them so much. So Claude and Datta always got the extra oysters. Sometimes, like this Christmas Eve, Datta gave Claude his extra oysters, too. Damyata made the signs to tell Claude that she hoped he wouldn't get sick from eating too many oysters. He just smiled and gobbled more oysters. There is no feeling in the world like being too full of oyster soup.

After supper they all went into the living room where the Christmas tree was all lit, with the new red and green and blue lights they bought in Des Moines at the big Younkers store downtown. Claude loved to go there; he was too old to sit on Santa's lap anymore, but he remembered fondly taking a little list of things he wanted for Christmas. He printed those lists all by himself, because he knew Santa would not understand signs. Besides that, he didn't know many signs back then. But it was fun just to sit in the fat man's lap and look at all the joys of toyland, all the elves at work in the workshop with their funny turned up toes. He walked by all the windows in the store, and the store was a whole city

block long. He looked at all the mannequins, and he wondered if they could talk.

He remembered once that a preacher came to Calliope for a special service. Damyata said that the man had a dummy that could talk. Claude sat in the very front row watching the dummy open and close his mouth. He knew by the way people acted and by his mother's signs to him that the dummy was talking. It made him wonder. If a man can make a dummy talk like that, why can't somebody make me talk? Why can't people understand me when I make my mouth move? Do all of these dummies in the windows talk to the people who walk by? What do they say? Do they wish people Merry Christmas? Or do they just stand there, trapped in glass, for the world to stare at as they pass by? Why do dummies talk when some people can't? It isn't really fair is it?

Claude thought about all of these things while he looked at the Christmas tree, watched his father take out the family Bible, and watched as his mother gave him the signs for what his father was reading. He wondered why his father didn't know signs. Can some people not learn signs the same way some people can't hear or talk? They were personal questions, too big for him, too big to ask Damyata about. Besides, he didn't want to ask her. She might feel bad and cry, or she might laugh like some of the big kids at school, even some of his teachers. She might think he was silly. Big kids were terrible sometimes. They make you feel terrible when they laugh at you and think you're silly.

Claude loved his Christmas trees at home. They were never very big or very fancy. And he and Datta always got a bucket of sand for the tree to sit in. Usually they bought the tree at a Christmas tree farm down by Lineville. Sometimes they cut it down by themselves. Once they even walked all the way back from Lineville, well almost all the way. Emory Brooks came by in his pickup truck and they rode the last couple of miles home in the back of the truck with the tree.

Christmas trees were like pets to Claude. Once a year you got to bring a special green pet into the house, and you dressed it all up in beautiful decorations, and you could talk to it with your eyes and hands, and tell it just how very pretty you thought it was. And sometimes, especially this year with the beautiful glowing lights draped around the tree, there seemed to come a message from the Christmas pet, that said "Peace on Earth, dear friends, blessed happy peace to you all, even if there are lots of men shooting each other way across the ocean; peace on your Iowa earth, peace on your little parsonage, peace on Calliope." Claude could be wrong, of course, but that's pretty close to what the tree said.

He stroked the cloth candy canes of the tree, and the silky cloth icicles. There were shiny glass balls that Damyata said he must not touch, and last year he touched one anyway and it fell off the tree and broke into a thousand pieces. He cut his finger trying to pick it up so Damyata wouldn't know. And it still hurt him to remember how he ran to her, grasping his bleeding finger, his face filled with

guilt. She didn't know, couldn't know how much it hurt him to be disobedient, and to destroy that which he loved so much. He couldn't remember which hurt more, the pain of his bleeding finger, the recollection of the drops of blood on the floor leading to the kitchen, or the look of pain in Damyata's eyes when she realized what he had broken. They all hurt again, somewhere in the collective memory, as he remembered. He held his finger against the red glow of a Christmas bulb, and swallowed a sob of remorse and remembered pain.

He looked thoughtfully at the pile of gaily wrapped presents and paused to let expectations build in his mind as he saw tags with his name on them. Then he moved on to the tiny nativity set with its angel and shepherds and wisemen gathered around Mary and Joseph and the Christ child. He stared at all their faces, looking with the sharp eyes of a boy whose whole communication process depended upon face reading. He studied and memorized each face, each tiny line. Occasionally a flaw in a facial expression stunned him, and he put the figure down, staring hard at the Christmas tree for some answer to his quandary. Then he realized that the tiny figures were not real, were toys at best, and the artists must be forgiven for providing improper messages on the faces of those who witnessed so great an occasion as the birth of Jesus. He held the tiny set to the lights on the tree, staring at the change in expression brought about by the shadows cast from each bulb. The blue lights cast a bold reverence on the scene, the green light made it frightening,

Claude thought, like the shepherds must have felt when the angel appeared. But the red light was best. It made everything seem rich and majestic and wonderful. Claude stared long and hard at the babe in the manger, bathed in the bright red light, glowing with holiness. And for a moment Claude whispered Da, Da, Da to himself. He thought of a bright red JESUS SAVES sign, and his mind blinked on and off like neon.

Then Damyata was beside him, signing to him that it was time for the Christmas Eve Candle light service at the church.

Claude pulled on his four buckle overshoes, buttoned up the blue plaid mackinaw, wrapped his scarf around his neck and pulled the stocking cap over his head. He watched the headlights of automobiles pulling into the church parking lot, and stopping along the street. He liked the soft glow of candles in the windows. He liked the rich smell of pine in the church, and the wreaths and hangings which decorated the little sanctuary. Even the two big pot bellied stoves which heated the building seemed particularly festive tonight, as if they too looked forward to the candelight service.

Claude and his mother always sat up front, just beneath the deeply varnished pulpit. Claude sat at the edge of the pew. He loved to rub the huge carved edges of the pews. His fingers traced the edges again and again. There were very special grooves which only his fingers knew about, and he touched them with reverence just to make sure that nothing had changed in his special place. The service was short and sweet, and the boy watched his mother's hands carefully, so

as not to miss any of the story that he loved to read on her hands. He occasionally glanced at his father's face, because he thought Christmas did beautiful things to Datta and the way he looked when he talked about Baby Jesus. He watched for the special little softnesses that crept into the eyes, and the tiny gentle smile about his lips; these were his father's father's marks, and perhaps nobody but Claude ever knew about them. They were most pronounced, Claude thought, whenever the congregation sang Away in a Manger. Whenever he knew the words, the boy joined his mother in hand singing the Christmas Carols, but some of them were too difficult for either of them, so Damyata simply signed the central message of the song to the boy, and they both sat watching the joy that came to the world of faces in Calliope.

After the elders and deacons served communion, Otis Voas was persuaded to present his annual Christmas Eve violin solo. Claude loved to watch old Otis play. He knew that the music must be very special. One year the old man had asked that Claude sit on his knee while he played, so that the boy could touch the instrument and feel the sweet vibration of its wood. But Claude was happy to watch the music of the old man's face. He saw, sensed, and loved the feeling that the artist had for his instrument, his song, and his audience. And when the eyes of the deaf boy and the country fiddler met in the middle of the song, a far greater message than that heard by the church was transmitted. For everyone else, the beauty was conveyed from instrument to ear to brain to

soul. For Claude and Otis the transmission was direct, as beautiful, meaningful, and powerful as the proclamation of a Herald Angel to a group of frightened herdsmen.

Claude's face was warm with appreciation for the old man and the rich warm silent music was still stirring in his heart when Damyata signalled that it was time to light the Christ candle. The boy, large for his age, but not at all clumsy, followed his parents to the platform behind the communion altar. There a beautiful wreath was formed, and every Sunday of Advent a new candle had been lit. Only a big beautiful candle in the center remained unlit. Datta gave a brief devotion. Damyata gave a little prayer and signed it so Claude could participate. Then Claude, his hands trembling with joy, struck a long wooden match and held it to the wick of the candle. No one there paused for a moment to think about the boy's pink, shiny head. No one considered his inability to speak or hear. For that moment, that quiet war time Christmas, he had spoken the word of their hope; he struck match to the wick of their spiritual dreams.

CHAPTER THREE

When Peter, Rachel, and Claude went home to the small stucco parsonage after the service, Claw was waiting for them, tail wagging, at the top step of the back porch. The porch itself was simply the unheated back room of the house and Rachel kept a little Pelton broom holder on the covered back steps leading to the porch. When Findley Reese and his father Garner built this house in 1926, they built it like their own, solid substantial, and stucco.

They also gave the parsonage the same kind of concrete sidewalks and steps they put in their own homes. A beautiful rock archway was testimony to Garner Reese's handiwork with metal railings and cement and stone. He built a fence along the front of the parsonage, and from scrap pipe and cement. The steps leading to the front and back of the church and parsonage were guarded by similar pipe railings. Claude loved to sit on the steps, holding the rails and stroking the fur of his dog.

A beautiful little garden, fringed around with cement imbedded rock stood just south of the house, and the warmth of the sun in any season made this a favorite spot for the dog. Often in the early Spring Rachel had to call the dog from the warmth of the flower bed. The little nook between porch steps and garden was also the one outdoor spot where north winds seldom touched, and Claw made this his favorite haunt. Thus, on Christmas Eve, the small collie stood wagging his tail in greeting. He had a special warm bed in the old wash house behind the house, but he knew that his family was

still about on this evening and he sensed a special excitement in his young master, a kind of restless exuberance which made him want to run and bark at the boy. All of the family stood patting the dog, watching their breath and his puff out into the Calliope night. They looked around at the serenity of their own little Bethlehem and sensed the holy stillness of the night.

Claude wiggled free from the group, and signed to his mother. "MAY I GIVE CLAW HIS GIFT TONIGHT PLEASE?" His face was flushed with the combination of cold and excitement. He had just remembered the big bone which was wrapped in white paper in the big General Electric refrigerator in the kitchen. He had taken a big red crayon and drawn a picture of Santa Claus on the outside. Then he had scrawled huge letters which said TO CLAW. He wanted to give Claw the bone before he put him to bed for the night. Every night when he was home from school Claude went out after dark with a little flashlight, making sure that Claw had food and water. When the dog had circled about in his little bed, finding the proper habit for sleep, the boy pulled some old rugs and canvases which were kept in the washhouse to cover him. Then he sat stroking the dog's head, sharing silent thoughts. Often the dog was asleep within a few moments, content with the hand of his small master on his head.

Rachel told the boy that he could get the bone for the dog, and the youngster danced awkwardly on the step, waiting for the key to turn in the lock. He burst through the cold

of the back porch, running across the kitchen to the big white General Electric. He picked up the soggy package, and ran back into the night. His parents watched as the dog tore at the wrappings of his Christmas gift; then they disappeared into the house.

The dog took the huge bone and marched dutifully into the warehouse, pausing inside to see if the glow of the flashlight had followed him. He dropped the bone into his bed, and paused to express appreciation by delivering huge kisses to the boy's hands and face. Then he settled into the little bed, gnawing the bone in the darkness. Claude checked the food and water bowls, and returned to the dog's bed, stroking the gentle black and white head, touching the new bone occasionally, letting his thoughts drift with the dog as his audience.

He remembered that he had made special plans to obtain this special Christmas present. He had taken a sheet of Damyata's unlined stationary paper, the kind that smelled like violets, and written a note to Will Speck, his favorite Calliope neighbor. Will ran Speck's store in the little building next door to the parsonage. Claude loved the big Coca Cola sign out front that said Speck's Grocery. It was an old sign, and Coca Cola had put new signs up on most other stores, but Will wouldn't let them give him a new one. He was suspicious of new things, and his old Coca Cola sign was good enough for him.

Claude remembered going into the store just as soon as he had come home from Des Moines and changed clothes. He was wearing his comfortable Calliope bib overalls, and his

tattered corduroy coat with the pockets broken out. Will was sitting there in his big old mohair chair just like always, with his feet up on the edge of the stove. He was reading the October Reader's Digest. When Claude came in, he put down his magazine and smiled at the boy, revealing a stubble of beard and four or five stained teeth. He pulled his bifocals down to see better. The boy handed him the note. Claude had worked long and hard on the note:

Hi, Will, I hope you hav a nice Cristmas. May I have a bone for Claw. He needs a present.

Thanks, Claude

Will read the note slowly, as if he were tasting it. Then he reached down and tied his shoestring, and shuffled to the telephone on the north wall back by the meat case. He cranked the phone twice. Claude didn't understand telephones, but he knew everytime Will cranked the phone, his wife Grace came running across the driveway to the store. He watched the back door, knowing she would be there soon. Will held up one arthritic hand, as if he wanted the boy to be patient.

Gracie Speck was a mass of wrinkles and shawls, and long metal-gray hair. Like Will, she loved this deaf boy who grew up next door to them. They had both practiced long and hard to be able to communicate with him when he came home this Christmas. She had a little bundle of packages under her arm, but she dropped them on the cutting table behind the meat counter, and ran as fast as her old legs would take her

to the boy. She hugged him and squeezed him as only Gracie could do. Then she stood back with Will and together they contorted their hands through not only the simple HI that they had used to address him before, but a whole series of letters which spelled out, MERRY CHRISTMAS CLAUDE. Then Gracie went back to the cutting table and picked up her little bundle of packages. She put it back down, and reached into the dry ice chest, pulling out a dixie cup of ice cream for the boy. She put it and a little wooden spoon in a small sack and added it to her bundle. Will wrapped the biggest bone he had in his shop in fine white butcher's paper, and handed it to the boy, his eyes shining, his hands shaking. And Claude ran home with his bundle of assorted packages to show Damyata. He was very pleased.

But now as he thought of it while sitting on the cold, scarred floor of the wash house, he wished that he had put Gracie's name on the note too. And he wished that he had signed them Merry Christmas too. He was just so surprised and so happy that they had taken so much time to learn his language that he didn't even think about signing anything to them in return. And he remembered watching their faces in the service at church tonight. They didn't always come to church, but they usually came when they knew that Claude would be there. He had tried to thank them with his eyes. He thought they understood, but he couldn't be sure in the same way that he could be that Claw understood what he meant, or his cat back home at the school. He knew that Will's hands

were old and stiff and that learning all those letters had not been easy. He sniffed a little bit, as he thought about it. Then he realized how cold he was getting. If he didn't go in soon, Damyata would come to get him. She wouldn't call for Claw, because she didn't like to wake him up after Claude put him to sleep. So Claude hurried to the washhouse door, hooked the funny old latch, and ran to the back porch tugging at the buttons of his coat as he ran. He was very tired and it had been an exciting day.

Claude took off his old coat and hung it on the rack in the back porch. He shivered in the cold, but he loved this little place of isolation. There was an old cream separator which Datta and Damyata used once a week when Otis Love brought them rich fresh milk from the farm out by Corydon. Datta and Damyata turned the crank until Claude could feel a strange vibration in his feet if he stood in the kitchen, and when he came to the back porch he could feel the vibration all through his body. It sometimes made his head throb. But he loved the rich cream, and the wonderful milk, freshly separated. Sometimes he and Damyata would get out the old Dazey churn and crank and crank the cream until it finally hardened into little yellow lumps. He loved to turn that crank, imagining all sorts of pictures in the constantly changing jug of the churn. And the little chunks of butter seemed to grow in size with every turn of the crank. He sat on the floor of the kitchen, his legs wrapped around the square churn to hold it in place, his eyes fixed alternately on the

kaleidoscope of the churn and the abstract pattern of colors in the linoleum floor. Sometimes he wondered if all boys and girls got to churn butter, or if they churned butter in Germany where all the soldiers were. Do soldiers get to drink cream, he wondered? Do they have it on the top of their oatmeal? Do they ever get to drink butter milk. His taste buds responded to that question, and **Claude** realized that he was lost in another reverie.

He shivered again, and snooped beneath the lid of a pie pan. He found some luscious fudge tucked away to cool in the back porch. He snooped in the gaily decorated container which once had contained fruitcake, and found a vast assortment of Christmas yummys. The temptation was too great for him, and he stole a little piece of divinity. He swallowed it just in time, because Damyata walked through the kitchen door, letting streams of light into the porch. Claude pretended to be hanging up his coat. Then he stooped over to roll the old braided rug against the door to keep the winter drafts out.

Damyata waited until Claude had gone inside the kitchen because she didn't want him to know where she kept her Christmas candy. Then she brought in the pie pan of fudge and the fruitcake pan full of divinity and date roll, peanut clusters, and taffy. Claude took a place beside the giant radio cabinet and felt the glow of heat from the big brown heating stove. He watched the glow of the flames, ever changing, ever leaping behind the plexiglas windows. He stretched his chilled toes toward the stove, feeling them tingle in the warm white socks.

He saw that the coal bucket was full, the wood box was stacked high with logs, and the kindling basket was as full as it needed to be in case the fire went out in the night. He felt very warm and secure in the little wall-papered room with scenes from some strange place of long ago. Maybe it was King Solomon's palace. The people looked very rich. All the people wore fine clothes and looked very graceful and gallant. They seemed to be laughing and talking. Claude wished sometimes that these people from another time and place could speak to him in signs but it didn't really matter, because he often imagined himself very fine and sophisticated as he spoke to them in silence, and saw them reply in their own very special language of silence.

Damyata held up a thumb and two fingers, signifying that Claude could have three pieces of candy before he went to bed. He took a big chunk of rich brown fudge with a walnut on top and a luscious piece of date roll which had been dipped in sugar. He took one more piece of divinity and felt just a bit guilty. He ate the date roll first, letting the fine thick juices melt in his mouth until each taste bud was filled to maximum with sugary joy. Then he swallowed the juices in brief tiny sips, allowing the taste to linger as long as he could. Candy was hard to come by at the state school, especially home made candy like this.

The boy held the fudge in his hand for a long time until the chocolate melted like clay on his fingertips, congealing to his flesh like mud at the edge of the pond in early spring.

He held the candy to the stove, comparing colors with the shiny brown appliance. Then he held the candy between himself and the radio cabinet, drinking in the difference in color and tone. He felt a kind of kinship with candy, stove and radio. Each brought color, excitement, and mystery to his life. Each enriched his feeling of being secure here in this paradise called Calliope, this little Eden where his few chores and occasional hardships were rewarded with so much warm love. He popped the fudge into his mouth and gobbled it as if he had never tasted anything so good in all his life. He put the divinity on the little table, next to the radio.

His eyes moved from the glow of two fancy Christmas candles atop the buffet to the fine glow of the Christmas tree, to the glow of lights on the cabinet radio. He pulled his chair close to the set and put both hands over the speakers. He felt the pulsation of sound, one of his favorite pastimes. He smiled at Datta and Damyata as they watched him in his ritual. He removed his left hand from the soft velvet multi-faced speaker and reached to explore the mysteries of the dial. He had learned many times that Datta became very upset if he touched either of the knobs marked volume or tuning, so he contented himself to trace the flowing yellow numbers on the dial, wondering what mystery these numbers held for people who could hear. Was there something about these numbers that made people hear or speak? Was there a magic formula you memorized? Was it some sort of secret code? He pondered on these things, his head growing more weary with each

contemplation. Finally he rested both hands on top of the radio, and placed his head on his hand, drifting off into a world of silent dreams, where dogs and numbers and candy and stoves and trees and wallpaper all spoke the same language of love and where he could stay in his peaceful little Calliope haven forever. He smiled as he dreamed, the vibration of the radio lulling him into deeper straits of slumber.

Rachel smiled at the boy asleep on the radio. It wasn't the first time it had happened, nor would it be the last. She often wondered about Claude's fascination for radio, but then she knew that he loved so much partly because he knew that his father did, and partly because he could feel the warmth from the tubes, and sense the change in vibrations by simply touching the device. She made certain he was asleep, then she and Peter carried the youngster to his room, tucking him in for a restful sleep.

They returned to the living room to hear the voice of Clay Rush saying, "This is radio station WHY, the 50,000 watt voice of the middle west. We wish you a most blessed holiday season, and hope you enjoy the following rebroadcast of recorded interviews from the European war front. WHY farm newsman Herb Hedges has been in Europe bringing Iowans first hand information as WHY's correspondent. Whenever possible he has visited hospitals, barracks, and offices to bring you the voices of Iowans in the war. Many conveyed special greetings to the friends and loved ones back home. We bring you this special holiday recording as a public service. Now

the voice of Herb Hedges."

Peter curled into his favorite chair beside the buffet. He could reach the radio from his rocker, a most comfortable, high backed affair which his grandfather had made when he lived in Ohio. Peter had loved it so much as a child that the old man saw to it that he received it when he could no longer use the chair. Peter's well worn Bible sat atop the buffet. He often stood at the buffet, looking out the south window toward the church and the archway while composing his sermons. He sat now, caught in the liquid trance of radio, hearing the voice of one who had grown up in his church, stood beside him in this very room, listened to this very radio, this wonderful machine.

He remembered how his parents had given the radio set to him and Rachel as a wedding gift twelve years ago when they were married in Joplin, Missouri. The radio was expensive; it still was the most valuable piece of furniture in their home, and he knew that his parents had sacrificed so that he could have this appliance which he so dearly loved, for they had learned early just how much Peter loved the sounds of voices.

His mind drifted in and out of the voice and static from the recordings. Sometimes the transmission from the remote interviews faded, and the sound of distant gunfire punctuated the static. But usually the voice of Herb Hedges was as clear as if he were sitting in the other big chair where Rachel now sat dozing. Even the static was fascinating,

like the dark chaos of the beginnings, when suddenly God created the heavens and earth. Peter thought about that every time he tried to define static in his mind's eye. Static was the slipping away of logic, of a clear symbol, the loss of meaningful communication. He could tell by looking at his congregation when they had lost the signal of his sermon. Sometimes he fought desperately to bring them in out of the static. Other times when he knew that he had been tuned out, he simply kept on preaching, captivated by the vacuum of his own static.

Sometimes he felt like Alexander Graham Bell. He remembered the essay he had read about Bell, a man who was trying to find some mechanical way to use electricity to reach the world of silence in which his wife had been forced to live. His invention of the telephone had brought the transmission of voices over long distances, but had never been able to tune through or above or beyond that great level of silent static which kept meaningful sound from entering the brain of the deaf.

Peter wished that he and Claude could communicate by radio wave, but he simply could not bring himself to learn the simple language of signs at which Rachel had become so adept. It seemed to him so primitive, like a regression; there remained that prejudice in his mind despite the fact that he respected both what Rachel did for the boy and what the State School did. He deeply regretted that his stubborn prejudice kept him from communicating more effectively with

the youngster for whom he held great respect and love. He wanted to enter the boy's world more often to share more things with him, because he knew the lad to be sensitive, appreciative and naturally knowledgeable about the deeper, more meaningful things in life, including the spiritual world. Sometimes when he was most engrossed in prayer, he would find the boy kneeling beside him, and at those rare moments, he sensed that the lad was reading his thoughts, intercepting them on a wave length far more powerful than sound. Other times when they walked in the woods at the edge of Calliope or along the railroad tracks they could share deep feelings with each other that seemed as elementary and native as the rich clay soil or the clear sharp blue of the skies. Claude would often stare long and deep into Peter's eyes on such occasion, and Peter had early learned that if he wanted communication to take place, he, too, must return the stare, entering bravely into a kind of shared hypnotism, an unashamed bond of trance which took ~~them both~~ into a world removed from distraction and confusion. Their world was free of conflicting opinion or the triviality of language. They were free, once they had made the escape, to move away from eye contact; they often ranged great distances from each other, both in space and idea. But when they had a confusion of ideas, or a need for clarification they came back to each other's eyes, as if they needed fine tuning like the radio did occasionally when static intervened. The boy seemed hungry for such time, and Peter knew that the moments of revery together were very

precious to both of them.

Peter knew, too, that he often entered this world of meditation, of day dream, on his own and that he found that world a restful place to be. He had to enter into such a world whenever he prepared a meaningful sermon. He nearly always came to that quiet place when he prayed. But the ground rules of his hearing society had told him that such a quiet private place would be spoiled if he allowed anyone else to enter. It was like the tiny spot in his parent's attic in Adrian, Missouri where he went to sulk and dream. His best memories were there, but no one had ever known about the secret place. If they had, the memories would have been less precious.

He didn't mind letting Claude into the world, though he knew that Rachel could never enter. He sometimes told her things from his own private revery, and he thought she understood, but they could not share the same retreat world, because it was a violation of their desire and need for privacy. Claude was not an interloper in that world, rather he seemed to be an interloper in the public world. He was an inside out person, a child of silence who had come to live in the world of noise. Peter knew Claude best in the moments when the two of them lived in the same quiet place, but he felt static from the world of noise. He couldn't stand the strain of the static, his noisy world kept calling him back from the land of the quiet. His thought waves were fragile when they were exposed to the pure soundless atmosphere and shared with

someone else. Each time he and Claude entered into the quiet world, he came away a little stronger. Each time the world of noise offered a little less static. Each time the headache was a little less severe.

But now on this Christmas eve, with the child sleeping in his bed, his wife dozing in her easy chair, and Herb Hedges bringing voices from far across the sea into his own room, Peter found his mind ranging far into the night of distance and times, caught perhaps by one of the waves which had brought the sound into his living room. He soared now, far into memory, a kind of smoke above the burning coals of the mind.

He remembered the first time he had the shock of hearing the voice of the middle west. It was the Fourth of July, ten years ago. It was hot, and Peter remembered the waves of heat rising from the main street in Calliope. He stared at the plexiglas window of the stove, watching the flame dance, stirring the coals of a memory stored temporarily in a hidden nook of the mind. Just before noon, he had gone out to burn the trash at the barrel near the old apple orchard. He remembered lighting the long handled match with a flourish and touching the flame to the papers, watching the little waves of heat rush to escape with the mad contact of energy and fuel. He remembered the ghost of a front page erasing itself with flames, its orange tongue lapping hungrily at the waste of yesterday's violence. He had stuffed the papers into the barrel with a vengeance. He felt like Jonathan Edwards.

"You sinners," he thought, "are like a spider dangling by a very thin thread over the anger of God, sinners in the hands of an angry God." He touched the flaming paper to the other trash with a flourish not unlike that employed by Audie Whispers when he led congregational singing.

Peter smiled to remember. Christmas brings such strange memories, he thought.. He glanced again at the radio, paused to hear the boyish voice of a farm boy from Kellerton, who now kept a lonely watch over an ammunition dump in rural France. Herb Hedges poured out his questions like cooking oil. He soothed, and stirred and touched all the lonely fears of this sad boy who tried so bravely not to sound sad, wishing everybody in Kellerton, the Merriest Christmas ever.

Peter remembered the sound of firecrackers on the Fourth of July, echoing into the distant Calliope of his mind. He walked back to the parsonage from the trashbarrel. He saw again and again the banner headline of that paper. It flamed and blazed and then was gone into the air and fabric of Calliope, into the muted quiet essence of the clay hills and silent cattle. Peter couldn't remember the headline, its shouting voice had faded as surely as the voice of that lad from Kellerton or Mitchellville or wherever it was. It rose, flamed, fell, and was gone, like a multitude of other voices, other headlines, other thoughts, but the memory of its destruction stayed alive in the mind of a man in calliope.

His mind walked slowly in the memory of the trash pile, firecrackers exploding here and there in the recesses of

remembered Calliope. He absorbed the heady humid smell of his own trash pile, his mind floating and drifting with the rhythm of the smoke. He wandered into the house, turned on the radio, and stretched out on the floor like a small boy. He glimpsed now to the braided rug, to see if something of his past still lingered there, a thread perhaps of the real fabric of remembrance. The flames of the stove created their own shadowy portrait on the floor, but Peter saw little of himself there.

Some memories cannot be denied, however, and Peter found himself again on yesterday's floor, kicking his toes, and concentrating through the static to the voice of an announcer far away in Kansas City. "Stay tuned to WKC in Kansas City for the noon day news." The voice was as far removed, tattered and torn as the wasting smoke of his back yard trash pile. Yet its essence floated into the room, filling Peter with an assurance that was very real. Peter listened, straining to hear. It was almost as if God himself were sending a message from Kansas City; Peter didn't want to miss one syllable.

And when the news was over, Peter toyed with the dial, fascinated with voices pouring across distances. Mostly, though, that day in Calliope found Peter picking up the sounds of static, waves of sound, fighting, struggling with each other to achieve meaning, to be proper signals, to convey some symbolic message which would possess meaning to someone. Sometimes, in those days he could pick up KSL in St. Louis or WLS in Chicago, but mostly Peter heard static. He turned

absent mindedly from static to static, imagining sometimes the voice of clarity in the blur of sounds. Sometimes the static seemed like the distant hum of trucks and cars on the road between Des Moines and Kansas City which ran just at the edge of Calliope, and the markers on the radio bands were like highway markers, and staring at the radio was like staring at a map. And nearly always when Peter turned on static ridden radio, he travelled many miles in his mind, far from the parsonage, far from Rachel, far far, from Findley Reese and stucco walls.

Then suddenly, out of the mindless apathy of static, there was a voice like an explosion, rocking Peter, even in its remembered state, out of his reverie. He reached again, as he had done then, for the volume knob of the radio, catching himself in the act of acting out his memories. It was such a shock, such a sudden, impossible shock that he had never wiped the wonder away, never in ten years of remembering.

Peter wondered if the dotted freckled face of the radio set were really smiling at him as if it were indeed the voice of a herald angel, bringing revelation to Calliope.

"This is the opening day of broadcasting for radio station WHY in Des Moines, Iowa. We declare our independence and yours by beginning our broadcast life on the Fourth of July. We hope you will make WHY a regular part of your listening day. We are the 50,000 watt voice of the middle west. We now return to our special presentation of Independence Day march music.

Peter remembered turning up the music as loud as he could.
He felt like cheering. He felt like David returning from
victory. He felt like Audie Whispers preaching a sermon.
Peter was not sure he had ever been so excited in his entire
life. Now in the quiet of his Christmas Eve living room he
walked to the Christmas tree, pulling the plug on the tree
lights; he stood with hands behind his back warming them in
front of the plexiglas fire. He mused for a long moment,
soaking in the warmth of the blaze and the final remarks of
Herb Hedges from his Berlin Christmas broadcast. He heard the
voices of German children singing Christmas carols in a huge
cathedral. He smiled at the irony of their joyful harmony,
pondering the universal message of peace on earth. Into the
receiving set he probed, seeking an answer to the voiceless
question, prying for answers in the glow of promise which he
found there.

When Herb Hedges signed off the air with a Christmas wish
to all Iowans, Peter rose to turn off the volume switch before
the static could settle in. He took the piece of divinity
from the table and let it melt smoothly in his mouth. He
picked up the coal bucket, opened the door of the stove, and
pushed two or three big lumps of coal into the mouth of
flames. He watched the orange violence leap toward the
heavens, touched the plexiglas, and pushed the door shut,
shuddering at his ability to control the elements, wondering
at the tiny waves of heat.

He kissed his wife awake, and walked to the refrigerator

-55-

for a late night egg nog before bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

"C'mon" said Orson Shelton, "you mean you're really from Calliope? Is Peter Benjamin your preacher?"

Shelton sat in his swivel chair in studio C at WHY radio. It was Christmas eve, and he had just put the 16 inch vinyl disc which carried the voice of Herb Hedges on the turn table. No doubt they would play it again tomorrow. It was a good disc, top quality recording. Orson thought it was the best that Hedges had done. After all, he'd shown the boy all the recording techniques he knew, and Herb just kept getting better and better.

He studied the young man who sat across the desk from him. He knew Clay ~~Brooks~~ was an Iowa boy, but he had no idea until now that the lad was from Calliope. He studied the pink face and the mop of auburn hair. The moustache was well developed. It was a bit darker than the wave of red on top. He liked the boy, but felt a little sorry for a youngster who had to work on Christmas eve.

"Yeah, Orson, I'm from Calliope. Not many people even know about the place, let alone about Pastor Benjamin. I don't see any clay mud on your boots. Surely you're not from that part of the country."

"Nope," Orson said. He checked the gauges to make sure that the amplification was right on the disc. He recorded each reading on his chart, scribbling details about the disc, the weather and the time of night. He wrote a little joke about spotting Santa Claus in studio B. Then he slipped the clip board into the hourly slot at the end of the desk

"Actually, I live out by Berwick, lived there all my life. I live in an old brick house built by my grandparents. The Sheltons are one of the oldest families in Berwick. We've lived along Four Mile Creek all of our lives. I may not have clay mud in my boots but if you look close, you'll find some Four Mile sandburrs on my pants cuffs; I keep em there for souvenirs, you know. Sometimes when I get to thinking of myself as a big shot, I reach down and stick myself."

"So how does that make you an expert on Calliope? I mean the town is just a little more than a wide spot and it probably ought to be in Missouri instead of Iowa. I'm afraid the place is going to become a ghost town if all of us youngsters keep moving out. But there is simply no living to be made in those hills; there's just no money there anymore. Heck, the bank closed down in the depression and it just sits there rotting away like everything else in town except the church and the county maintenance garage. I didn't think anybody knew about the place. But I'll tell you this. There's no place like Calliope on Christmas eve. I've been thinking about the candlelight service at our church all night. And last year when I was in France I kept thinking back to that little church, wishing I was there, holding my own little candle for everyone to see, seeing all the stubborn joy written in people's faces... Hey, c'mon Orson, don't just sit there smiling at me. Tell me how you know about my town."

"Actually, I don't know your town, just your preacher and his wife and son. I put a radio in his car for him last

Christmas in the garage out behind my house. They stopped by on the way home from Council Bluffs. That boy, followed me all around the shop, watched me every minute."

Clay sat at his desk, staring off into space, wondering about the Benjamins, about the church, about Claude. He sat silent, alone in the solitude of his mind. He sorted through the commercials and spot announcements he had to give before signing off.

"Hey, Clay, get on the mike. It's time for station identification." Orson had moved into the next room. He was shutting down the turntable. Clay announced a brief message while Orson flipped the disc and prepared to play the other side.

This is radio station WHY in Des Moines, Iowa," he said, "The fifty thousand watt voice of the middle west."

He watched Orson place the arm of the phonograph needle on the whirling disc. The engineer adjusted the modulation control, pulled out his clipboard, and busily recorded the readings on his gauges. He pulled out his blue bandana handkerchief, wiped his brow, and walked back into the room.

"We cut that one close, old man," he said. "I guess we'll have to get our conversations started earlier if we're going to talk about home towns. Oh well, the important thing is we made it and on time. That's what they pay us for."

Clay kept reading through his commercials.

"I'll be ready for the next one," he said. "It's just that I hadn't thought about Claude for a long time."

"I don't know about the boy, Clay." Orson fumbled with the switch of an old turntable he was repairing. He eyed the clock, and pried at the points of the switch. He took a tiny file from his pocket.

"Too big," he muttered. "I'll have to get a smaller one."

He walked into the next room, searched through a metal drawer full of tools, and returned with a smaller file. He touched the points with the file, eyeing them carefully. Clay was silent.

"I got a Christmas card from them this year; that's all I know. I guess his baldness and being deaf are because of the accident. He's lucky to be alive. Rachel did it, you know. She pulled him out of the flames, you know. Risked her own life."

"I know." Clay was staring at the microphone.

Orson, studied the lad's serious face and decided it was time for one of his ancient jokes. He let the joke slip out the side of his mouth, his round face crinkling at the edges. His graying curls shook when he leaned back to laugh. He was a total laugher, his whole body shook. Clay didn't laugh.

"Come on," Orson said. "We got a commercial to do. Younker Brothers. Make it good now."

"Clay read with authority and precision. He was good and he knew it. So did Orson. Of course he had been practicing all of his life, waiting for the moment, the time when he could be the voice of the Voice. He had spent hours and hours rehearsing for the job that now was his. He had spent hours

praying, too, and talking to Pastor Benjamin about what radio was really like. They both spent hours listening to commercials and newscasts, hearing all the details, practicing all the accents.

Clay knew that he had been fortunate, more fortunate than most could ever hope to be. When he was drafted into service in World War II he didn't know if he would ever see Calliope or Iowa again. He hated to go. He loved his father's garage and vaguely hoped that he could stay there working as long as he liked until he had some chance to get into radio. He dreamed of going to college, but the opportunity was too far removed. When he came through basic training, his mechanical skills were noted and when he was shipped overseas, his first assignment was as a mechanic for Army vehicles for press correspondents in the Paris area. Later he was promoted to jeep driver. When it came time to match drivers and reporters, Clay was given responsibility for Herb Hedges from WHY.

Hedges and Rush hit it off immediately. It warmed the correspondent's ego to have a driver who had heard practically every broadcast he had ever given. And Clay could recite all of the announcers and newscasters on the staff without batting an eye. He was full of questions about the station, and Herb was himself just a bit homesick. Together they could escape the horrible noise and brutality, could soar back across the miles to the little Eden which radiated out from Des Moines, Iowa. They talked about the state fair, about the corn crops, about the soil moisture, about the million and one things which

make Iowans Iowans.

Clay drove the jeep that took them to Flanders Field for a Memorial Day broadcast. He camped with Hedges near St. Lo for a special report direct from the front. He maneuvered his way through the artillery to Nantes. He helped prepare the broadcast from Argentan. Clay sat shivering at Le Mans as the shells exploded around them. He heard Herb's voice recording the event for broadcast back in Iowa. He wondered how he happened to be here instead of there. Later, with incredible luck and sheer daring, they stood just outside the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's headquarters, and Clay shuddered with the feeling that he was somehow intruding on ground that shook with terror. He trembled to think of the plotting and scheming conducted here. He thought of the outpost as a kind of radio tower, a central point from which waves and waves of terror and unrest spread across the globe, infecting the minds of millions.

Clay wondered if war was perhaps some terrible disease which travelled by sound. Its sounds were agonizing, loud, terrible. Other wars, earlier wars had been horrible enough, but they were limited to the muffled gunfire, the clank of sword, the gushing of human blood. They swept as far as the waves of their destruction would carry. But this one was everywhere. All over northern and southern Europe, in the Pacific; the fronts had multiplied with the magnification of sound. Radio brought the war into homes everywhere, dragging with it some of the infection, leaving the filth, the mindless

agony, the horrible stench of burning flesh lodged somewhere in a collective consciousness. War had been given a voice, and the hysteria of the populace was in response to its terrible shouting. Peaceful, hidden, unknown places like Calliope shivered and cowered to the metallic rhythm and robot-like movement of the noise. There was no safety, no outpost too remote to escape that dreadful universal noise. And it had started here, here in this Eagles's Nest, so remote, so other-worldly. Clay was afraid, he wanted the broadcast over. He wanted back in to the safety of his own zone. He went back to the jeep, feeling the security of its wheel, touching its pedals, wishing desperately that it was his father's Studebaker pick up, and that he sat outside the garage in Calliope, wondering at the stillness of the night.

He was glad when they were back to their own front. He had never believed he could feel so secure, so close to the field of battle. But there was a security as he watched Herb transcribe his voice onto the huge glass disc. He watched the recording device, trailing around and around on its turntable, swallowing, capturing, imprisoning the voice of Herb Hedges, picking up every tinge of his native accents, trapping even the little traces of fear and weariness which crept into his voice unknown. He watched the man with the eightball microphone, knowing that he knew him as well as perhaps any other human being, knowing that they had travelled roads of adventure which were shared by few humans. He watched, knowing that a few months before he had sat in his father's

garage in greasy coveralls, munching bologna sandwiches and drinking Coca Cola while Herb Hedges gave the noon day news. He watched fascinated at the marvel of mechanization which could drain the voice of a man from his body, inject it onto a piece of glass, and send it soaring across thousands of miles to a destination of waiting ears. He watched, staring at the turning disc until it swallowed part of him, too, pulled something of his life, his being, his destiny into that turntable, sealing him forever into a world of microphones and clocks and red tower lights. He knew then that there would never be an escape, that he must give a portion of himself always to that voice eating machine, that he would be drawn inextricably into its spinning web, spewing forth the time of day, the weather report, the latest news, whatever the tubes and wires dictated. He was subservient to its demands. He drove Herb Hedges to the Hotel Scribe in Paris for much needed rest.

While Herb relaxed in Paris, Clay was reassigned to another correspondent. He wished then, and many times thereafter that he could somehow wing his way back to cornfields and hay barns. It was only three weeks until he drove unaware onto a German mine near Saint Lo, France. He and Tony Sawtell, correspondent for WBZ in Boston, were thrown from the jeep by the force of the blast. He still recalled with horror the flash of instantaneous fire, the sickening moment of lift, the pain which seered his mind.

The rest of his service days were spent in hospital

barracks near Saint Lo.

There was little opportunity for mirth in those shabby barracks. The bright red scar of pain and agony was carved on every face. The blood soaked sheets, the pain filled eyes, the constant ardent reminder of gunfire filled the lonely days. For Clay, as for many others, it was a time of deep depression. He wanted to spill out all of his grievous errors, all of his stupid blunders, but he found no receptacle for the nausea of his mind. No one of his barracks mates could handle his story; they all constantly bombarded him with their own anguish.

Thus, when Herb Hedges walked smiling into the room one bright August day, Clay was primed for the telling. He sought and obtained permission to walk about the grounds with Herb, and he hobbled by the announcer's side, relieving himself of the memory that would not go away.

Gunfire slashed across a distant meadow; tears welled up in Clay's eyes.

"It sounds so much like firecrackers," he said. "You know, those big old Missouri firecrackers, the kind everybody gets on the Fourth of July."

His voice trailed away. Pain surged through his injured leg.

"When I was a kid, Herb, twelve or thirteen, I had a bunch of those firecrackers that my cousin brought home from Trenton. I climbed up on the railroad overpass just at the edge of Calliope where the train passed over the highway.

I'd been throwing firecrackers down into the ditch, watching them explode."

Herb tried to be patient. He had good news for his friend, and he wanted to talk about better things, but he listened, trying not to look annoyed.

"This green convertible came around the bend, and I thought it would be great fun to scare them, so I threw it, I threw that firecracker like a grenade. and it lit right in the front seat."

Clay's eyes had grown wide in remembrance. He had never told anyone--never--anyone. The scene flashed before him.

"They hit the overpass and the car bounced back in the road. I was running, but I saw a baby fly out of the car, and I stopped and vomited right there. I was running again."

Herb looked at his friend like a doctor might examine a patient.

"But you were just a kid, Clay, you didn't know, you didn't think..."

"They died, Herb. They died. "Only the baby lived, and he can't hear, it burned his head, the fire, he'll never have hair..."

"But what can you do, Clay? What can you do? If it had been here, ten years later, would you be troubled by it? It's over. It's done. You can't change it."

The color was coming back to Clay's face. He breathed deeply; he felt like a muddy Iowa field after an August down-pour. He looked out over the distant green meadows and heard

the persistent rhythm of gunfire.

The moments passed too quickly; soon Herb was in his jeep. They were smiling now.

"By the way," Herb said. "I put in the good word for you at WHY. Ralph Dart is waiting for you to stop in when you get home."

Clay flew home from France on September 23, bearing an honorable discharge, and a stiff leg that would probably torture him all of the days of his life. He stopped at WHY before he placed the long distance call home to Calliope. He had his job with the station by the time his father showed up at 11th and Walnut in his Studebaker pickup. He started to work on November 15, doing spot news, weekend announcing, holiday fill ins, and some weather reporting. He wrote commercial copy, planned weekend program logs, and became familiar with the operation of the station. That's why he was here, ready to give the sign off message at 12:05 Sunday, December 25, Christmas Day, 1944.

After the presents were opened, after the trips to Grandma and Grandpa's house in the country, after the big dinners with relatives, after the afternoon of skating and sledding all over the Iowa hills, the rural people of the state came home to do chores. There were a few extra handfulls of grain for the chickens, lots of bones and scraps for the dogs, extra hay for the cows and horses, extra corn for the hogs. After all, it was Christmas, and Iowans are close to their land, close

to their animals, happy in the shared pastoral life. And this Christmas was different. There were missing sons, gone everywhere from the farms, serving on ships and planes, in foxholes and barracks, and jeeps and trucks, and buses, many of them gone from their quiet rural homes for the first time ever at Christmas, most of them wishing very sadly that they could be back, gathered around the kitchen tables, blowing their breath in the cold milking stalls, gathering eggs in the straw floored chicken houses. And there were awkward gaps in conversation, long strange pauses when some callous or forgetful person asked when Charles or Buddy or Tom would be coming, asked if there were extra chores, or was the boy off at his girl friend's house this year. There were tears, too, lonely Iowa tears, shed in private and public in little towns and country homes, and barns and workshops. There were Iowa tears that fell in France, in England, in Germany, in Belgium, in Hawaii, Guam, Iwo Jima. They cried for the separation of distance, for the horrible slashing of family ties, for the dead who could shed no more tears, for the innocent who were entangled in an angry war which they could not comprehend or explain. They served in strange places, performed strange acts, shared meals and beds with strange people because the angry, raucous voice of war was amplified, modulated around the world in a crazy, illogical pattern which could not be retrieved or controlled until it had blown itself out like an Iowa snowstorm.

By nightfall they had come in from the barns, watching

the last streaks of red fall in the southwest, watching the clouds turn somber purple, fading, fading, shading into deep gray and black. They had carried in the buckets of water, the bundles of wood, the buckets of coal. They had carried out the ashes, burned the trash, straightened the living room. Now they hung up the caps, the shawls, the work worn mittens, the overall jackets. They puffed and struggled with boots, and stuffed them in corners and closets. Then they gathered around oak and walnut or pine or occasional new fangled plastic tables to share in a quiet Christmas night meal. The glow of the day was fading, the holiday had worn thin. And there was still a special vacuum for a missing loved one or perhaps more. Special prayers were offered. Quiet thanks were given.

After the meal, there was the clearing of dishes, the rustle of paper, the giggles of new toys, and the voice of Christmas music on WHY. Then at eight o'clock sharp, all activity stopped, all business ceased. Fathers added coal to the stove at 7:55. Mothers hurried to finish the dishes and put them away. The radio sets, small and large, handsome and ugly, sat in the midst of hopeful smiles, and wistful watching. Parents settled into chairs, children sat hugging their own knees, rocking back and forth on linoleum floors and braided rugs. Some stretched out before fireplaces or pot bellied stoves, absorbing the heat, waiting for the music to begin, and the fun. It was a special Christmas treat in 1944,

the weekly Saturday I^Uowa Barn Dance Frolic fell on Christmas this year. Everybody was waiting for the special show.

From studio B downtown at precisely eight o' clock, Clay Brooks took the microphone and said,

"It's eight o' clock in Des Moines; this is radio station WHY, the fifty thousand watt voice of the middle west. And now direct from the Shrine Auditorium in downtown Des Moines, we bring you the voice of Ralph Dart and the Iowa Barn Dance Frolic."

"Thank you, young fellow. Hello, Iowa. This is Ralph Dart; come on in. We have a real Christmas shindig for you tonight. We're goin' to hop and holler, listen to pretty girls sing, tell funny stories and be entertained like you've never been entertained by the Harmonizers. Pull up your chair, lean back and listen, cause you ain't never heard nothing like what you'll hear tonight. Now to get things moving, here's Russ Strawn and Rod Scovel to tell us the story of old Tommy Tucker. Didn't he used to live out there by Bondurant, Russ? That's what I thought. Used to raise hogs. Same Tommy Tucker I knew when I was a boy. Yessir. Let er rip boys."

And everywhere in Iowa, farm home smiles started to melt over faces, sparkles started back into the eyes, Dad's arm slipped over mom's shoulder; there's just nothing like the barn dance to make you forget about everything else and just enjoy yourself. That Russ Strawn he sure can sing, can't he?

"Thankye, thankye boys; that was sure mighty fine."

Let's all hear it for Russ and Rod again folks."

The audience of men in overalls, women in new Christmas gingham dresses bought at the S and L or from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, stood up and cheered, as if their favorite steer had just won a state fair blue ribbon.

"Now that's just what I wanted to hear folks, and I'll tell you why. It's not for Russ here. His head is already so big he can hardly get that ten gallon hat on it. And Rod knowed a long time ago that nobody in Iowaay could play the banjo like him. No sir, I didn't want you a clappin' just to make these here boys feel good. I wanted my boss to hear how many folks were here tonight to help us put on the Iowa Barn Dance Frolic on a mighty cold and snowy Christmas night. Ain't that something, Harmonizers? There must be five hundred people sitting out there. I'll tell you what, why don't you boys do a little number just for them; course we'll let everybody else listen in, but mind you now, this song is just for the folks who came out on this cold Christmas night and paid 35¢ just to watch the greatest show in Iowa. Sing it boys."

Ralph Dart stepped back from the microphone, and the four Harmonizers in identical western outfits and string ties stepped to microphones on the other side of the stage. Vern Austin took his place at the piano. He stroked out some warm up bars and the audience cheered wildly just for that. The Harmonizers grinned widely in practiced precision; then with a cue from lead singer Lou Barnett, they were off and running, pleasing all their listeners with beautiful harmony

and spots of humor.

"Now then folks, could you ever have a better Christmas present than that? I'm gonna have to watch what I say here because I wouldn't want either my wife Helen or the Harmonizers to get mad at me, at least not at the same time, but I think right now we have an even better present for you, at least she's better looking. Uh oh, now I am in trouble with Helen for sure. Uum Huum, Shirley, is that a new Christmas dress you're wearing? I just wish all those folks out there could see this beautiful lady in a beautiful white dress singing I'm dreaming of a White Christmas. We don't have to dream this year, do we folks? Here she is, Miss Shirley Huston."

When Shirley Huston stepped into the spotlight, all the audience settled into their chairs, smiling with expectancy. The men watched carefully to see if she might be looking at them. Sometimes she blew kisses into the audience, and they rather expected their holiday remembrance. Wives looked on in mock jealousy, knowing that there was nothing to fear from this angel dressed in white. If it made the old man feel good, what of it? Besides, Russ Strawn had been known to do some sly winking when he was on stage. The farmers from Mingo and Alleman and Carlisle were not to be disappointed. Dark haired Shirley with laughing eyes blew kisses to every man in the auditorium and a few extra for good measure. After all, it was Christmas. And when she sang, it couldn't have been more quiet; no audience could have been more rapt.

Through the drifting snow, along the winding highways, a

woman's voice wafted; she was every Iowan's sweetheart with a Christmas kiss and a Christmas song. A few people knew her, some had seen her sing. But most knew her only in their mind's eye. Did she really look like a movie star? Which one? She had a better voice than most of them; that's for sure. If she was only half as pretty as she sounded, that was enough. Harriet sang, and emotions stirred all over the state. Surely she did not know, could not know how like an angel of light she was on that cold, cold Christmas night. It was important, so very important that she was live, that the barn dance was live, that some of them, some Iowa farmers actually sat in the auditorium close enough to touch, if need be, to see that the dream was true.

It was so very, very important to know in the winter of 1944 that there were still Barn Dancers, and pretty girls with angel voices, and old men with funny stories, and wives who boxed their ears for looking at young girls in white gowns with angel voices. All this was real, it couldn't be make believe, so it had to be live, right there in Des Moines where you could go and pay 35¢ to see it. It had to be real, didn't it?

Of course it had to be, because war was so terrible, so bad, so ominous, so close to home. If there wasn't a boy gone from your family, it was the lad down the street who helped you grind corn.

And it was even more real when Herb Hedges's voice, the farm newscast man, came over the air from so far away, with

the horrible ratatatatat of machine guns, that unforgettable whine of bullets, and you knew that it might be your son, your nephew, your neighbor; you knew it, sensed it, dreaded it and occasionally talked about it, cried about it, prayed about it. That's why it was so important to know that your cousin in Derby, your wife's folks on the farm in Fontanelle, your uncle in Cedar Rapids could all be listening, all hearing at the same time as you, the powerful voice of hope, of laughter, the good times live, live, live, from the Shrine Auditorium in Des Moines, live from the angelic throat of Shirley Huston, live from the endless chatter of Ralph Dart. It was dream fabric, that much is true. It was antidote for war nightmares, solvent for the corrosion that comes from overexposure to terror. Iowans gulped at the medicine, swallowed it rapidly, begging for more of the sugar coated sweetness, and the voice of the middle west kept right on programming with heavy doses of music and laughter. The Harmonizers had several spots during the week. Shirley Huston often sang with them as did announcer Jack O' Leary, whose Irish tenor outpourings had mothers weeping and sweethearts hugging everywhere. Farm newscasts were interspersed with the music of Russ Strawn and Rod Scovel. Young Bobby John joined them, freshly arrived from a tour of duty in the Pacific. The Voice of the Middle West poured happiness over the airwaves in huge vats, spinning its sugary dreams all over the state, and the listenership grew; the audience drooled in anticipation of more.

When Spring came, gardens grew up in victory all across America. Multitudes of Iowa farmers looked out on their fields, watching the shoots of tiny green corn and beans with a new thrill. Herb Hedges was coming home. Jack ~~Smith~~ ^{Smith} would remain on his Pacific report until news of Japanese surrender was voiced, but the Pacific condition looked hopeful, too. The Iowa fields looked good, even when it rained too much.

It was Claude's twelfth birthday when Peter and Rachel arrived at the Iowa State School for the Deaf. The morning was beautiful and cool on June 1, 1945. Peter wore his usual black tie with small red diamonds. Rachel wore a new blue spring suit, an anniversary present from Peter. They rushed to meet their birthday boy, and promptly took him to the nearest restaurant to celebrate.

They noted how tall he had grown, how neatly he kept his room and his clothing. They noted too that his eyes had darkened, that his eyebrows were growing thick. He was becoming a man, this silent child of theirs; time was in too big a hurry.

As usual Claw was there in the back seat to greet his comrade, all ready for a summer of activity at Calliope. The road home from Council Bluffs was a long one, so the family stopped back by the grassy campus to pick up a book Claude had forgotten and to allow Claude and Claw time to romp together on the lawn before they left for home. It was really a beautiful place, especially in the fullness of spring with fresh

grass and new leaves. The stately brick buildings were a world of their own, an important, sometimes frightening world for Claude, but he often wondered what it was like in the summer here. He liked the wide full rich lawns, and wondered if they stayed so green all summer or if they turned off brown in July like the grass of Calliope did. The lawns were always green in Council Bluffs spring and fall, and he was glad, glad to be going home, glad the war was almost over, glad to see Claw again, glad to be alive and twelve.

The old man walked around to the little garden behind the station and pulled a few red shiny radishes, washing the dirt from their roots at the pump beside the station. He brought a handful to the car; he handed them to the family.

"Awful good radishes this year. Best I ever tasted. I think it must be the cool weather. Peas are gonna be good, too, if it doesn't turn off too hot. I don't know about the taters; they don't look quite right to me. I'll tell you this though, I'm a going to have the darnest crop of onions you ever saw. Where you folks from, let's see, judging from that clay on the car it must be either the last tier of counties or northern Missouri. Am I right?"

"You hit it on the nose, my friend," said Rachel. "We're from Calliope, Wayne County. Say, are your horses tame? My boy is deaf, but I know he wants to go pat them."

"Shore, they're tame. Foller me around like puppy dogs. If you have the time, the boy can take one round in the field with me. I'll keep a close watch on him. don't you worry.

I got a couple of grankids of my own. They help me all the time. Besides, I'll bet that boy could outrun these two old horses anyway. Come on son. He can bring the dog. I got two or three of 'em running around here somewheres so one more ain't gonna bother the horses any."

The old man had huge hands. He lifted Claude down and pulled him toward the corn planter. His straw hat was battered and sweaty. His overalls had seen many seasons. He needed a haircut three weeks ago, and a shave last week. But he was a man happy in his work.

Around the field they trudged, the old man shouting at the horses more to entertain his audience than challenge the horses. Claude sat transfixed, watching the corn fall into little troughs dug by the blades of the planter. Another blade came behind, filling the trench, covering the corn. Claude watched the big bottoms of the horses, swaying rather lazily, as if they were not really concerned with planting corn or any thing else for that matter. They just did what the old man told them, just plodded along pulling planters or plows or hay racks or corn wagons or anything else he hitched behind them. He was good to them, fed them more than they really wanted, gave them water when they weren't really thirsty, so why should they not do what the old man wanted once in awhile?

Peter and Rachel sat in the car at the edge of the field watching a Robin feeding her young. Two blue birds flitted by a nest in a fence post made from an old railroad tie. A

ground squirrel darted off into his tunnel when Claw got too snoopy. The minister and his wife watched the old farmer pull the boy off the planter. Claude had taken off his shoes, and he walked barefoot in the rich black soil, using his big toe as a kind of shovel, flipping the porous dirt as he walked.

Claude spotted Claw, and the two romped off into the pasture next to the field. The old man followed them, a little boy again himself. The pasture sloped off into a ravine with several dead elms marking the progression of a small stream. Claude stooped here and there, picking Dutchmen's Breeches and Sweet Williams for his mother. Claw chased off after another ground squirrel. The old man watched intrigued.

"Hey, looka there. What's you got there, boy?"

He reached down to the clump of grass and flowers, and straightened with a grin. He straightened his back, running his hand along the bend of the spine. He saw Peter and Rachel walking his way.

"Come here folks, have you and the boy ever seen any of these growing wild? Watch your step now; you might ruin some."

Rachel summoned Claude, and the three walked to where the old man stood.

"I got a hitch in my get-a-long." He said, gingerly rubbing the soreness in his back. "But if you'll bend down there by where my foot is, you'll see a big fat morel mushroom. And I'd be willing to bet that if you looked further around here you'd find some more. Pick all you want. I picked a whole big sack of 'em yesterday down in the holler of my apple

orchard. I bet somebody back there in Calliope knows how to fry em. Believe me, there is just nothing better than mushrooms in the springtime. You folks go ahead and look around. If I don't get that corn planted my name's mud, and that's probably what I'll have in this field tomorrow by the look of those clouds a gatherin out there. Come on now Maude, Get up here Queenie. We got work to do. Hyar, Giddup there."

In five to ten minutes, the family had found thirty to forty of the mysterious little fungi, gathering them quickly and with great delight. Peter took off his suitcoat, using it as a bag for collection. Claude was the best hunter, finding them everywhere he turned.

They were like little flesh colored Christmas trees, hiding amongst tufts of grass, behind dead branches, under bushes, at the edge of thickets, almost everywhere he looked. He learned quickly to go to the bottom of a small hill or cinline, and look up, always looking from the lower level. By doing so he could find many that his parents overlooked, even walked over because they were looking from the wrong angles.

Being deaf, he thought, helped him to use his eyes more effectively. He could see things that they could see, if only they would look at them in the right way. They'd never had to learn to look, to seek in the right way. They'd never had to learn to look, to seek in the same way he had, so even though they still couldn't see what's really there. He wondered if that was what was wrong with his hearing. Maybe

COLE LIBRARY

he tried too hard to hear. Maybe he just hadn't learned to hear in the right places or in the right way. Maybe hearing is like thinking. You have to think in order to see properly; maybe he just didn't think right about hearing. Maybe he just hadn't trained himself to hear. Maybe some day he'd find hearing the same way he found these mushrooms. Maybe hearing grows up suddenly in a person's head the way mushrooms just grow up suddenly on country hillsides. Or maybe mushrooms called hearing don't grow everywhere, just among those people lucky enough to have them. He knew mushrooms didn't grow in Calliope. But Otis Love had them at his place. And we even found some last week at the state school, out back by the football field. They told us all about them in science class. Maybe hearing is like that, too, just growing in certain places, a mystery to those who don't have it.

The Benjamins and Claude brought double handfuls of mushrooms to his father's coat, and stood to stretch. They were at the bottom of a huge ravine. The sky was only a tiny blue triangle of bright blue directly above them. The cliffs of the ravine shut off all other view. As Claude stood staring at the patch of blue, two huge hawks soared into view; Claude tugged at his parents' clothing, and pointed upward. As they watched, the two hawks, in perfectly coordinated and silent descent, swept across the blue triangle, covering the entire viewing area with the majesty of their wingspan. Claude gently squeezed the fragile membrane of a mushroom, feeling the impact of a moment of the kind of beauty that etched itself

CLARK LIBRARY

permanently into his memory. The birthday when he was twelve, the strange deep wondrous ravine, the mystery of the mushrooms, the outstretched talons of the birds, the strange strong wonder of their wings. All of it etched momentarily more meaningful in his mind. He watched his parents, still staring at the patch of blue and wondered if they, holding hands and smiling, found it all as mysterious and wonderful as he, or if these were moments which happen more than once, maybe again and again; he wondered if there was anything to hear when the hawks soared so close. He squeezed the flesh-like membrane of the mushroom. He wondered if it would have grown larger if he had left it in the ground. He wondered what made it grow, so suddenly as if touched by some great primordial urging of the earth and sky, some great blue skied mystery.

They struggled up the bank, Claude pausing to kick dirt in a snake hole, and touch the tiny beautiful fabric of a young hickory sprout. He sniffed at gooseberry blossoms, scratching his cheek on a thorn from its branch. It looked like lots of gooseberries this year. Datta, Damyata, and Claw were already in the car when he got there. They all waved good bye to the old farmer and his horses. The sun was starting to set in the northwest. They drove on toward the clay hills of Calliope. Claude watched a hawk circling above the oak woods to their right. He watched until they had moved beyond the limits of vision. But he thought he saw the sure grasp of the talons snare a young rabbit, sweeping the creature upward with the huge force of silent wings to a waiting family of young hawks.

He screwed up his face in mixed wonder, pity, and fear; he stroked the dog, remembering how he too, sometimes mercilessly chased rabbits to a bloody throated extinction in the pastures at the edge of Calliope. He saw the squirming of the creatures, the blood matting on the fur, the horrible agony of their eyes. Once he had turned away crying, angry and hurt because his dog would not respond to his pleading cries. The animal had turned vicious, and Claude had been afraid. He saw no reason to attack the little animal. It had not bothered either of them, had not even frightened them. But the dog was unrelenting in pursuit, cruel in attack, vicious in demeanor. Claude wanted to cry when he thought of it, but he knew that it would probably happen again, that it must be part of that knowledge which belonged to Claw and not to him, and which he could probably never understand. Still he did not want to think of the beautiful flights of the hawks as being part of death. But he could not think otherwise. Perhaps it was a mother and father, spotting twin victims for their family's supper. No matter what caused two hawks to soar in that fantastically beautiful moment, it had to have something to do with death and preservation of life. Is death so beautiful, he thought? Is life so precious?

He touched and fondled the mushrooms lying in the black coat beside him on the seat. Perhaps we should have a funeral for them, he thought. We were like a huge slaughter in the war, destroying a whole community of mushrooms just for our own greed and pleasure. He touched the skin of the mushroom

again, startling himself with the sensation. He opened his shirt, held the mushroom close to his chest. Flesh of my flesh, he thought.

Soon it was dark in the car, and the blanket of blackness covered the countryside too. Only rarely was there the glow of other headlights, the outline of farm windows along the road. Early summer insects crashed onto the windshield, rendering sacrifice of their brief and tender lives. But the car kept climbing through the night, its lights still shining, its occupants only slightly moved by the quiet death around them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Calliope in early summer was a beautiful place for a boy. It was Claude's favorite world. He far preferred it to the military regime of the state school, though he missed the smiles and gestures of his silent friends. And though he loved the hurried busy life of the state fair where his family worked every year, he much preferred the tranquility of the town he loved.

After breakfast he gathered the dishes, signalling his mother that he would wash them. He took the tea kettle from the stove and carried it to the sink. Once there had been running water in the house. The faucets were still there. In fact, the pump was still there. But the pump was broken beyond repair, and the water from the hand pump in the back yard was far superior anyway. So Peter Benjamin had said nothing. Carrying water was not such a big thing. He had done it all of his life, anyway. He knew that the church budget could barely maintain his salary and keep the doors open.

In the kitchen Claude got out the dishpan and poured some detergent in the chipped porcelain bottom of the big pan. He poured in the contents of the kettle, stirred it to get bubbles, and went to the big metal pail for more water. He saved just enough water in the bottom of the bucket to prime the pump and then put the tea kettle back on the stove, setting the gas on low. He returned to the sink and plunged his his hands into the pan, feeling his flesh react to the hot soapy liquid. He slipped his wrists into the water, tingling

to the sensation. He toyed with the dishcloth, and finally reached for a glass. The rule of dishwashing was: glasses first, tip them up to drain the soap off, cups next and saucers, then plates, then bowls, and finally silverware and pots and pans. If the water got too greasy, you just had to get some more, but usually there was enough if you followed the proper procedure. By the time you have everything washed, the tea kettle should be whistling, thus hot enough to scald the dishes, and your hands or tummy too if you got them in the way.

Claude liked scalding. He always felt more clean when he saw the steam rise from the recently scalded dishes. He felt purged, washed clean.

This time he had to go to the reserve bucket to replenish the tea kettle. Damyata always wanted the tea kettle full of hot water. You never knew when you might need it. When he had filled the kettle and put it back on low heat, he returned to dry and stack the dishes. Damyata always put them away, so he stacked them in neat piles at the end of the cabinet top, beneath the green cupboard. He loved the blue willow dishes. He always dried the plates first so he could smile at himself in the blue willow world. It was a fascinating oriental world with strange buildings and graceful trees. Claude always thought the people were happy, however, and he thought it was probably because they got scalded so often. They were constantly purified in their little China world, and he liked going to the land of their China silence. The cups and saucers were blue willow, too, but the plates were best, because you

could see yourself in their world, big and smiling like a happy god, watching all their doings on this bright June morning.

The glasses were always hotter than the china, so he let them drain longer, drying all of the china pieces first. There were a few cheap plastic bowls, too, and Claude always liked these too. They reminded him of his old corduroy coat with the pockets out, or his old beat up shoes. Sometimes they were like Datta's car or Emory Brook's pickup, or the bank across the street. They were beat up, not at all fancy like the blue willows, but they were old friends. Sometimes, if the light was right, you could see yourself in them, too. But they didn't have a story to tell like the blue willows; they were just there, like a good friend, always there.

Then there were the multitude of china bowls, some big, some little. Most of them had chips on the edges. As a matter of fact, so did most of the plates. Some of the bowls had big long cracks running down the side. A few were cracked all the way through the bottom of the bowl, but they still worked, still kept serving their purpose, like the old people of Calliope, faces lined, eyes drawn, but they still performed their daily routines, still fulfilled their purposes just as they did when their eyes and smiles were as bright as Claude's. He liked the yellow ones best, with the little painted bowl of tulips spaced and repeated around the outside. There were several of these bowls, all cracked or chipped in various sizes Claude loved them all.

As he dried the glasses, most of them saved from jelly and jam bought next door at Specks, Claude stared out the window at the beautiful green of Calliope. He fingered the raised glass of his favorite, the one with clusters of grapes around the bottom.

Damyata gave it to him because he liked grape jelly so much. Claude looked out the window and saw his father walking through the archway on his way to the church. He was wearing his black suit again. He always wore it; black suit, white shirt; sometimes Claude wondered if he wore it to bed. His father paused to admire the bridal wreath in bloom near the archway. He paused, and walked to the lilac bush, reaching high on the bush to snap a delectable branch, not quite open. He sniffed at the tiny bundle of flowers as he walked to church.

In the living room, an announcer proclaimed that he spoke for radio station WHY, the voice of the middlewest.

Claude saw Claw lying just outside the window in the warmth of the early morning sun. He lay on his side, lazily wagging his tail as he, too, watched the man in the black suit. The flower bed was spilling over with blue bells; their generous blossoms of baby blue smothered the bed and rolled over the edges onto the sidewalk. They spoke of the joys of springtime, like no other flower, the tiny pink tongues shouting out of blue mouths some kind of jubilee song, some kind of lighthearted melody which only flowers and dogs and bees and boys know, especially boys who speak, themselves, in

silence. It was a happy gay song and they said something about sunlight, too, and baby beans sticking their little green heads through the ground for the first time. It was the same song sung by the people of blue willow; the music was the same on the tulip flowered yellow bowls. It was a joy song, a small town early summer, boy and dog, silent song of joy. And the music was best in Calliope.

Claude hung the dish rag and dish towel on the rack at the edge of the sink. He paused to stare for just a moment at the strange collection of rocks set permanently into the little wall at the back of the sink. Garner Reese was a fanatic with his art. It gave the little house some unique trappings of luxury. Who cares if the faucets don't work, or if that beautiful rock fireplace in the living room does nothing but send a smokescreen through the house? Nobody has a kitchen sink like this one. Nobody has a prettier fireplace. The faucets are beautiful ornaments, too. These pretty rocks set in this kitchen wall are reminders, Claude thought, reminders of what Garner Reese wanted Calliope to be. They are voices saying Calliope is a special place, a pretty place; don't let it die. See that it stays unique and colorful.

Old Garner died the same year that the bank closed. It was Garner who had planted the lilacs, carefully staked out the blue bell bed; Garner who had carefully rolled on the red and white stucco, arranged the beautiful fencing, Garner who had done so much to see that his dreams, quiet, artistic, simple dreams could live in the parsonage. Sometimes when Claude

looked out at the bank across the street he thought of it as a tomb for Garner Reese and his way of life. There was something holy about the bank; Claude knew that his father sensed it too. Sometimes he would find him sitting in a living room chair, his Bible open, but his eyes gazing at the hollow dusty shell of the bank. Claude knew, too, that most of what he knew of this old man had come from his father, and his father had known him only briefly when the old man had become crotchety and blind, hobbling each day to the church, pausing a few moments in the front pew beneath the pulpit as if listening to a sermon from the past, sometimes straining his ear, sometimes cupping his hand behind his ear. But Peter, standing at the back of the church heard no voice, saw no visitor to the church but the old blue eyed man in bib overalls and a dirty grey sweater with a stubble of icy blue beard on his face. It was never more than a few minutes that the old man spent at his vigil. He always carried a little tin cup with him. He hobbled up on the platform shuffled through the choir seats, and reached into the baptistry. There was a little fountain there. He knew; he installed it himself. The old man turned on the fountain, filled his cup to overflowing, and carefully turned the faucet off. Then he hobbled to the archway of the parsonage, feeling this way and that with his cane until he came to the red hand-pump well at the back of the lot. He knew that the pump had to be primed, kept telling Findley that it needed new leathers, stepped impatiently to its platform, and poured the cup full

of water into the well. He heard it gurgle, drink thirstily of his offering, then he stroked the metal handle with glee, holding his cup beneath the iron spigot. He always sampled the first offerings, made a wry little face, and proceeded to pump and pump until the water passed his satisfaction level. Then with measured steps, being careful not to spill any of the precious liquid, the old man walked to the front porch steps of the parsonage where he sat down to face the bank and drink from the old tin cup. He drank slowly, methodically, allowing the water to work a purification rite within his mouth. The old eyes were blind, but habit told them what they saw. He stared rigidly at the bank, feeling the warmth of the morning sun on the wasted tissue of his tired eyes. On the morning that he died, Peter saw him sit long and lonely on the step, holding the cup as if it were some holy relic from Biblical times, staring into the emptiness of the day, pondering no doubt, the future of his town, his soul. And he saw the old man walk out to the archway, touch each stone as if it were a child, a pet, a part of himself. He saw him reach out both arms and embrace the bridal wreath as if it were a close and dear friend. He saw the old man walk to the lilac bush, reach to its very pinnacle and snap off a branch of the youngest flower there. And he saw Garner Reese smile as he walked back down the street, a bit of lilac in his cup.

Peter had thought it so beautiful that he had written Garner's funeral sermon on lilac colored paper. He called it "A bit of Lilac in His Cup." Claude had read the sermon over

and over. Many times when he fondled the beautiful geodes in the fireplace, the strange stalagmite like rocks in the little walls by the kitchen sink, he thought about the old man. Sometimes he felt like he knew the old man better than anybody, that he and old Garner spoke a kind of eternal language which was not limited by syllables and shouting. He saw beautiful words in the fireplace, he saw love written all over the grounds, the flowers of his home, and he knew that especially in springtime the old man spoke again, always the same message of hope and love and cherished beauty.

In the living room, the hollow voiced announcer repeated the commercial message he had given exactly one hour before. No one in the parsonage heard.

The boy gathered up the empty water bucket and placed the the long handled porcelain dipper in the reserve bucket. The reserve bucket was never filled at the well. You just stored water in it. It was old, water stained, and weak. It had sprung a leak once, but Datta couldn't bear to part with it, so he went to the hardware store in Lineville, got two washers, a small nut and bolt, and a piece of pump leather. He fixed the leak, and the old bucket was a permanent kitchen fixture. It just never moved from its place. Once a week or so, Datta took the bucket very tently, as if it were an invalid, and washed its proud old bottom. There was an extra bucket in the back porch, too, so Claude carried two pails to the well, his dog trailing close behind, fanning bluebells and bleeding hearts with his tail.

After Findley Reese heard the funeral sermon for his father, he brought the old tin cup which had belonged to the old man and wired it to the red handled pump. It still remained, and Claude thought that no water on earth tasted better than water from that cup at the well. And whenever, he brought in water, he always used the cup to prime with. So he poured the water from the bucket to the cup, and from the cup to the well, waiting for the well to drink in the offering. Then he very carefully pumped the buckets full, watching the water spill over the edges and down the rusty metal through to the roots of a spreading pussy willow shrub. He loved the balanced tug of muscles in each shoulder as he carried the water back to the house. He glanced at the church and thought he saw his father smiling at him from the study window. He walked by the coal house, by the wash house and paused on the top step of the back entryway to open the door into the porch.

Claude stared into the twin reflecting pools, saw himself looming like a giant raised up out of the water. He felt like a giant today, a Calliope giant whose skin rippled exactly like the rippling flesh he saw in the buckets. He grinned at the image in the buckets, looking first at one and then the other until he couldn't be sure which bucket to watch. He'd felt the same way when he found it necessary to really watch someone's eyes. When he was little, Danyata used to sign to him "Look me in the eye." He had the same reaction then as now. Which bucket is the true one? Which eye is the correct one? Does one give more accurate portrayal

than the other?

He took the buckets out under the big elm tree next to the porch, waited for the little circular ripples to settle, and watched the blue sky peek through the green leaves of the big tree. The tree seemed almost awesome in his reflection. Caught up by his thoughts, he lifted the buckets again, watching the tree and sky blur into a mass of blue gray ripples, stirring like a whirlpool before him. I think sound goes in ripples like that, he thought. But what makes it come out right in people's heads? What makes it settle down? My buckets of hearing won't settle down. I can't get clear pictures in my sound. It keeps stirring and stirring; the

sound just keeps going around and around. It won't even focus. It won't come through. Why? Why?

The dog stared at the boy and the buckets, whining softly. He nudged the boy gently, and pushed his nose toward the bucket. Claude smiled and carried the buckets to a big old skillet which was reserved as Claw's water bowl, and watched the dog lap at the contents.

After the boy carried the buckets into the house and lifted them to their proper places, he ran to his room and gathered up pencil and paper. Damyata was making his bed, so he signed to her that he would be playing in the back yard.

He hurried to the wash house, crawled under an ancient work bench, and gathered a pile of sticks. Mostly they were elms and oaks from the yard. There were a couple of Wahoo sticks which he picked up from the Speck's yard next door. And there were some tough hickory and locust cuttings from

McConnell's timber. He returned until he had retrieved all eight stacks of sticks. There were exactly 20 sticks in each stack. He took each stack and arranged it neatly on sidewalk spaces beside the wash house, where the sun shone in radiant splendor against the fading red boards.

Sometimes he and Datta sat here in the summer sun, listening to Dutch Ragman and his broadcast of the Chicago Cubs. Datta listened to the big old battered radio that once belonged to Garner Reese. Datta wrote notes to Claude, letting him know when the score changed.

Claude sat down in the midst of the sticks, sorting and testing each one. He had a small brown shiny buckeye which he carried with him constantly. It was badly nicked and bruised, but he cherished it greatly. He tested each stick by swinging the stick like a baseball bat and hitting the buckeye like a ball. A few didn't make it. They either snapped or splintered. Most, however, stood the test, and when they did, Claude recorded names for them on his spiral tablet. These sticks were his ball players, a whole league of them. He had names for each one. And this was spring training. The old veterans had to be tested to see if they could stand up to the rigors of a summer's play. If they couldn't hack the pressure anymore, they would simply have to be replaced by rookies, and Claude would conduct his annual spring stick player hunt. It was one of his greatest joys.

By noon, the boy had sorted and recorded them all to his satisfaction. Sometimes the dog would run after the buckeye,

returning it carefully to the manager, for his immediate inspection.

There were onions and radishes from the garden for lunch, bologna and cheese sandwiches, some mustard greens, and some homemade cottage cheese which Otis Love brought with the milk this week because he knew Claude loved it so much. The milk at home was so much better than that stuff at the school. This tasted real. Claude could see the cows in his mind's eye as he drank. His favorite was the red and white spotted one named Fawn. She was lively; sometimes she would chase him and butt at his like a billy goat, but they both knew that she wouldn't hurt him. She was really very gentle. She just liked to play.

After dinner Claude asked his parents if he could go down to Lou McConnell's timber with Claw. He needed 35 new sticks for his baseball teams and the best and strongest rookies were timber leaguers. Besides he wanted to see the baby lambs, and see if there were any mushrooms or gooseberries. And maybe he could find some flowers for Damyata. Datta didn't seem to care, but Damyata was very firm.

"You must take a nap first," she said. She spelled the signs with finality, so Claude knew better than to argue, even though he thought she was treating him like a baby.

"You must promise not to stay long. And be very careful of the baby lambs. Don't let Claw chase any of the ewes. They won't be very strong after they've just had babies."

It was a brief nap, but Claude enjoyed the sleep, whether

he admitted it or not. Datta had gone off to visit hospital patients in Corydon by the time he woke up, and the sun was very hot and high in the sky. The road was hot to his bare feet as he ran by the store and the little row of houses. He paused to peek in the wide front door of Cave's Feed Mill where old Mr. Cave and his assistant Paul were tying the tops of hundred pounds gunny sacks filled with freshly ground feed. They waved at the boy and his dog. Paul straightened his back, and wiped the sweat from his huge pink forehead. He pulled off his striped blue baseball cap, shook off the grain dust, and put it back on, grinning a wide toothy grin at the boy. Sometimes he and Claude played catch in the church parking lot. Paul could throw the ball farther than anybody he knew. He couldn't catch very well; and he wasn't much of a hitter, but boy, could he throw.

On they went, across the creek bridge and along the timber to where Lou McConnell had put up a little stile so he and other people could get into his timber without climbing through or over fences.

"Sheep are hard critter to keep in a fence." Lou said. "They make it tough enough for me to keep them in, let alone havin' other folks breakin' down the fences. So I'd rather build me some stiles and let folks climb over that way than to chase my sheep all over Calliope and half a Wayne County." They're hard enough to catch when I got em in the pen."

Sometimes the old man got angry with people who trespassed or hunted on his land. He hated hunters. A couple of

times he had fired his own shotgun in the direction of hunters with a stern warning to do their hunting elsewhere. But Claude had a standing agreement to make use of the grounds whenever he wanted. Sometimes he helped hold sheep while Lou sheared their wool. A few times he had helped round up lost sheep. Last year he helped Lou in his display at the state fair. This year Lou had been hired to be in charge of the entire barn, and he had already told the Benjamins that he wanted Claude to be his helper and errand boy if they would let him.

So the boy was no stranger to the rugged hills, ponds, and ravines that made up the 240 acre Lou McConnell sheep ranch. Claw was born here, a purebred son of the border collies which were as much a product of the ranch as its sheep. Claw, like the others, was trained as a sheep dog. His ancestors from Scotland had been herding sheep on the moorlands for generations. Each Border Collie has an instinct for herding that can be sharpened to mastery with a little practice.

Thus it was only a matter of minutes until Claw had rounded up half a dozen ewes and their little ones. He led his little flock to a pond, and lay beside the waters watching as the sheep drank from the quiet water's edge. Claude laughed to watch his dog at work. He knew that at one call or clap from him, Claw would cease watching the flock and run to his side for praise or hand signals. But the dog was enjoying himself, like a salesman at a convention. And Claude moved amongst the hickory and hackberry trees at the edge of the

pond, its branches falling away into the pond as if it, too, stooped to drink. The branches were covered with blossoms. Claude couldn't resist picking some for Damyata. Then with sticks gathered and apple blossoms by his side, he lay down on the warm clay hill, absorbing the sights before him, thinking surely no boy could be so lucky. He pulled the green baseball cap over his eyes to keep the sun's glare out. He watched the ewes, nudging at their little ones, the dog with head upright, tongue out, panting triumphantly in accomplishment. He saw the bullfrogs, leaping from the water's edge, and from the logs in the middle of the pond. He saw the little ripples which signified fish coming to the surface. He watched water skimmers, skating over the surface of the water. A deep, sleek, blue indigo bunting and its olive colored mate flew to the pond's edge to gather mud for a nest. A bright colored Baltimore Oriole flashed its colors in the apple tree, raising its throat to the heavens.

Claude hugged the earth as if it were a great clay mother, some great green breasted lover of his soul. He smothered his face in the rich green cover, pulling his body tight to the surface. He looked up at the tiny lambs, sweet and fragile, sucking from their mothers, pausing to sniff at the scents of the day, romping over the flower decked grass. The boy rolled over in the grass, tumbling side over side down the slope. He caught himself and lay on his back, his eyes closed to the brightness of the sun. He raced his eyes behind the lids and saw purple lambs sucking the teats of scarlet

ewes. He saw bright yellow apple trees and a huge blue sun shining through an orange sky. He smiled at the strange distorted world of Calliope in new colors. He closed his eyes and dreamed of a world in which he understands all of the sounds of a multicolored world. Everything talked to him. And he answered them all back in a quiet unassuming way. He spoke to the innocent tiny lambs and explained to them all about the world of humans and cities. He spoke to the bunting about what it was like to be the son of a preacher. He explained to the oriole how a person could wash dishes and carry water.

And the little lambs and their mothers gathered around the boy and told him about the love and birth of an animal. They nuzzled each other and spoke in unassuming tones. Their words drifted in and out of his ears like the gentle breeze flitting through the apple tree. They were as soft and tender as apple blossoms kissing his cheek. They were as gentle as his tongue lapping his hands.

He dreamed of soft tender, moist gentle words forming in his mind, connecting themselves to his ears, pulling, tugging at his brain. And the soft warm sun melted the walls of his tongue, letting it flow freely like Datta's in the pulpit, like the stream that poured into the corner of the pond below him. He smiled to watch the voice flow. He wondered at the ability of the apple tree and the oriole and the bunting to hear his words. He stroked the sleeky bunting

in his hands. Its feathers smoothed like fur. The boy stirred from his sleep. His dog lay beside him. The sheep were wending their way over the hill toward the barn. A curious red headed woodpecker sat staring at him from a fence post. And the sun painted little fluffs of innocent lambs in the sky. Some were pink, some were purple. There stretched a multicolored stile over a brightly colored fence. And Claude reached and stretched in the sunset, gathering his sticks and apple blossoms. His body responded slowly, stiffly, but his mind ran far ahead, climbing the stile, racing along the dusty road home to Calliope.

Chrystal Gottschalk limped out of her little Sunday School room, her face shining with the same smile she had bestowed on little ones in Calliope for fifty years.

Clay Brooks and his bride, Sharon sat in the sanctuary this Sunday morning. They were spending their honeymoon in Calliope, relaxing in the clay hills and green valleys and dusty towns of their childhood. Clay was a celebrity for all the townsfolk. Again and again they wanted to know what Herb Hedges and Russ Strawn and Shirley Huston were really like. And Clay, basking in the glory, repeated over and over the stories, being careful not to garnish them too much, knowing at least partially that he was creating myths in these southern Iowa minds that would live as long as the clay hills and dusty towns.

Chrystal saw her former pupil, and hobbled to him, fat arms extended to paw his back with chubby hands. She cried as she hugged the young man, thinking of the glory extended from her through him out to all of Iowa. He was her pride and joy. The hero of Calliope, the voice of the middle west, and she loved him deeply.

She moved from Clay to Sharon, giving her a hug, too, smiling into Sharon's blue eyes the kind of message of love which only a Sunday School teacher of fifty years can convey. She gathered up her books and Bible and settled herself behind the piano, finding each of the songs for the day.

Claude ran to find his spot below the pulpit. His mother went to the room behind the pulpit to bring out a folding chair which she placed next to the wall, facing Claude at an angle. She interpreted everything from the sermon, and Claude could glance occasionally at his father and occasionally at old Chrystal at the piano.

Peter busied himself, checking here and there to make sure there were enough elders to serve communion, that the announcements were properly prepared and that any visitors were properly greeted. Then, at precisely five minutes to eleven he was back in his big mohair chair behind the pulpit. He glanced out at the smiling springtime faces of Calliope.

From his pulpit at the front left of the auditorium, he could look out easily upon all that occurred in the sanctuary of his church. Sometimes a choir stood behind him and to his left. Today, as on most occasions the choir loft stood

empty. Far to his left behind a big pot bellied stove sat Chrystal, playing her prologue to the service.

The bulk of the audience sat in ten pews arranged in a row from the stove and piano to the back of the church. Six more pews were directly before the preacher. Behind them was another huge pot bellied stove. Behind the stove was a pew known as the elder's pew where the elders waited for their portion of the service.

Behind that was a big coat and hat rack with room for folks to congregate and take off their wraps.

There were aisles down both sides of the auditorium, and a central aisle which led to a big walnut communion table with big scroll letters on the front which said "This do in remembrance of Me." On either side of the table were big mohair chairs reserved for the elders when they served communion. The table was set with a stack of brass communion trays; the top lid was bedecked with a little cross. Two candles and their brass holders were there, too, and the matching offering trays sat to one side.

Peter rose to welcome the congregation to the house of the Lord and turned to page 163 in his hymnal, inviting the congregation to stand while singing all verses of "Holy, Holy, Holy".

The minister loved to hear this church sing. Sometimes he would stare off into the stained glass windows, the scenes of harvest, and saints, and the open wide Holy Bible, and sense the saints themselves joining in the singing at Calliope. He

often thought and commented that he believed that the angels in heaven, might not themselves make more beautiful music. Peter was no great musician, but he knew that the beauty of these joyful songs was not in the musical accomplishments of the singers, but in the spiritual attitudes of their hearts, in the respect that they held for the church and the songs, in the reverence they felt for their God.

When the singing was over, Peter glanced at his foster son on the front pew before him, at the expectancy of the congregation and asked for prayer. "Our Father," he began. The boy and his mother raised their hands to join the prayer in the language of signs.

One verse of "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood" was sung and the two elders and four deacons came forward, kneeling before the communion table as they offered prayers.

Claude particularly liked this service because it was unique to his own little church. Some other churches served communion every Sunday, but not many. And he knew of no other church where the elders and deacons got down on their knees before the communion table and actually offered prayers as if they meant what they were doing. He loved the honesty of his friends here. And he liked to see dignified Findley Reese bowing at the table next to old Frank Cave when they offered prayer. Findley always looked as though he were being offered an ambassadorship, dressed much better than Claude ever hoped to dress. He wouldn't think of coming to church in anything less than his very best, in the same way

that he would never think of entering the county maintenance shop in anything but his greasy coveralls. Old Mr. Cave, at seventy five, seldom wore a suit at all. If he did it was the same one he'd worn occasionally for the thirty five years since his daughter got married. Usually he wore a baggy pair of grey trousers and a brown and red plaid shirt. Sometimes he wore a simple gray sweater, if he really felt dressy. No one in Calliope ever thought anything about it. No one ever would. It was their way. Worship was far more important than appearance. Neither Findley or Frank would ever be criticized for their choice of apparel.

The two men offered simple heart felt prayers. They prayed for real needs as they saw them, and they prayed for blessing upon their observance.

Claude watched as the loaf and wine were distributed. The bread was unleavened, flat, like crackers, in big pieces on each plate. A small doily was in the bottom of each tray. The participants took the loaf, broke off a piece, and passed the plate to their neighbors. The tray of wine was arranged in several small glass cups, each placed in a holder cut carefully into the brass plate. When the tray came to Claude only a few glasses were missing. He stared into the plate, seeing many eyes of wine staring back at him. He saw his image reflected in each cup. He looked from one to the other trying to decide which image he would choose. Finally he selected a glass from the center, and drank the cool sweet liquid. He thought of mushrooms and lambs and dying rabbits. He

looked long and hard at the picture of Jesus holding a little lamb which hung just behind the pulpit. He thought about the tiny lambs at Lou McConnell's farm. His mind was stirring with thoughts about tiny lamb's blood, and Jesus saying do this in remembrance of me. He thought of the cross, of Jesus with stakes driven through His hands and feet, and blood dripping down His face. He thought of dead German boys, blood matting their blonde curly hair, smoke rising from destroyed villages where once they sat in church and stared at communion glasses and crosses on the wall. He felt a suddenly heavy burden of guilt and wiped tears from his eyes. He felt his father's eyes upon him.

Claude reached over the back of his pew and pulled a small black Bible from the rack which held hymnals and Bibles. He flipped through the pages, while the elders and deacons distributed the offering trays. He picked up a hymnal and paused at a favorite of his. "Open my ears that I may hear voices of angels, hovering near." He shifted his gaze to the painting hanging on the wall near Chrystal Gottschalk. An angel stood, hovering very near to a very radiant Virgin Mary. It had always seemed to Claude that the two were speaking with their eyes, transmitting a kind of love message to each other. But now he realized that the angel was speaking, and Mary was listening as if her ears had suddenly been opened after years of silence, as if hearing some perfectly wonderful, moist rich sound from heaven. Maybe some day it will happen to me, Claude thought. Maybe an angel will speak to me. Maybe I'll

really hear the voice.

Then the boy saw his mother, her hands moving before him with an evangelistic cadence which told him that the sermon had begun. Claude flashed back to the painting on the wall. He studied the face of Mary, stared at the little lines of care around her eyes. Then he watched his mother's eyes, comparing the fabric, sorting through the likenesses. He thought he saw the same kind of spiritual glow radiating. Did his mother love him as much as Mary loved the angel? Or was it just the kind of love that mothers show best in their eyes. His mother was very much like Mary he decided. Very pretty, very special, very kind. He watched her eyes more than her hands. She knew, but she did not correct him. She smiled at his wonder, but continued her translating as if she, not her husband, were preaching the sermon.

It was only when his father started to preach about lambs that Claude started paying more attention to his mother's hands than her eyes. He glanced occasionally at his father and at the huge picture behind the pulpit of Jesus carrying a lost lamb. He loved to hear about David the shepherd. He thought of the shepherds who were frightened by the sudden presence of angels. Then he himself felt a pleasant sort of surprise as he turned to see his friend Lou McConnell coming down the aisle carrying a tiny woolly lamb. He wanted to run over to Lou and pat the gentle little creature. Nothing like this had ever happened in church before. He turned excited to his mother. She was translating his father's closing words.

"So today, brothers and sisters, Lou McConnell has brought us a tiny lost lamb, so we can see for ourselves just why our Lord spoke the parable about how much a shepherd cares for the lost ones. We're going to sing an invitation hymn to close our service, but before we do I want to remind you of what John heard the voice of Jesus say when he was in exile at Patmos. It's from the book of Revelation. He that has an ear to hear, let him hear what the spirit speaks to the church. This little lamb speaks to us in his own way today. The spirit speaks through him. What he says to you may be more important than anything I've said all morning. Shall we stand as we sing, first and last verses of page 248."

Claude watched as his mother signed the words of "Just As I Am Without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me." Then calmly and carefully he stepped away from his seat and moved to where his father and Lou stood at the front of the church, near the communion table. He reached to touch the lamb.

"Da," he said. There were tears in his eyes. "Da."

Peter watched the boy gently, feeling hot tears roll up behind his own eyes. He wasn't sure what to say, but he knew Claude had come to express his faith in Jesus Christ. He took the lamb and placed it in his son's arms. Rachel came to stand beside her son. Chrysal Gottschalk stopped playing the piano. She dabbed at her eyes, smiled at her weakness, and started to play again.

Claude's hands moved above the sheep. He smiled up at his father. Rachel's voice trembled as she translated her

son's words. "I believe," she began.

And when the service had ended, when all of the townsfolk and farmers of Calliope had gone home for Sunday dinner, when Clay and Sharon Brooks had hugged and kissed the boy and gone back to Linveville, Claude stood at the top of the church steps, stroking the wool of the lamb, wondering at the little lines of tenderness about the animal's eyes.

During the afternoon, Peter and Rachel rehearsed with Claude, explaining every detail of what would happen when he was baptized. He had seen perhaps two or three baptisms in Calliope, but it was just not the same thing as contemplating the act for yourself.

Thus, when the evening service was begun and small crowd had assembled in the church, Claude watched fascinated as the early summer breeze tugged playfully at the curtains of the classroom where he dressed for his baptism. He felt the curtain, watched the pink and blue flowers ebb and flow with the wind. He stared out the window to watch a huge red orange ball sink over the highway that ran from Des Moines to Kansas City. He watched cars passing by, silhouetted against the ball of flame like tiny players on a distant stage.

The wind tugged the curtain from Claude's hands and upset a box full of old pamphlets, brochures, and clippings that Datta used sometimes for sermon ideas. Claude pulled the window shut, wondering if the wind had a voice that other people could hear. He wondered if the wind was shouting, like

Damyata said he did sometimes when he didn't know it. Other times she signed him that he was whispering. He wondered if the wind whispered sometimes, and if people couldn't then tell what it was saying. Claude decided that the wind was happy that he was going to be baptized. He picked up the papers, piling them in the box, glancing absent mindedly at the titles.

His eyes paused on a tract called The Baptism of the Holy Spirit, by Reverend Audie Whispers. The letters of the title were big and ornate, a gaudy border ran around the entire edge of the pamphlet. It reminded Claude of a poster for a carnival that was posted at the state school. Claude felt proud that he knew Audie Whispers. And he thought maybe the wind wanted him to find this tract just before he was baptized.. He glanced at the pages. It read just like Damyata signed when Audie gave a prayer. It was full of bombastic language. It explained something about the day of Pentecost and how a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire were signs of the Holy Spirit and how God poured out his spirit upon men that day in Jerusalem. But Claude didn't understand why the apostles spoke in tongues. He wondered if the tongues of fire had anything to do with what Audie meant by speaking in tongues.

He wondered if the rushing mighty wind said anything, or if maybe the wind spoke to the apostles. He turned to a mirror hanging on the wall behind him. He stuck out his tongue and studied it, touching and probing it with his finger. He didn't know how his tongue could be on fire. He remembered his dream

about soft moist words falling gently on his ear like kisses. He touched his tongue. He wondered.

Then Damyata was at the door signing that they were ready for his baptism. She handed him a white handkerchief; he smiled and held it folded in his left hand as they had practiced. He stepped into the baptistry and felt the wooden steps sway and float beneath his weight. Datta was smiling at him and talking to the congregation. Claude felt the warm water soak around his chest. He looked out in the congregation. Chrystal Gottschalk sat at the piano dabbing her eyes. Lou McConnell and his wife Hattie smiled up at Claude. Old Elder Cave sat with his arms folded across his chest. He looked like an old Indian chief in baggy pants and a sweater. His wife Flora sat upright beside him, her hair wrapped in a knot at the back of her head. It looked like the color of dying elm tree bark. She wore her favorite grey print dress with huge pink flowers.

Damyata stood to the side of the baptistry near the candle holders. She looked very tall and pretty in her blue gingham suit and high heels. She was signing.

"Claude Hunter, Jr. because you have professed your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and expressed your desire to be buried with him in baptism, I now baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. His left hand came up over Claude's, bringing his own hand and handkerchief over his nose and mouth. Claude felt his father's right hand fall into place in the middle of his back as he fell

backwards into the warm arms of the water. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth rush over his lids. Then he felt his father's hand pushing him back to the surface. He stood upright, feeling the water dripping from his head and eyes, like tiny drops of tender flame. He felt washed clean, scalded, shiny bright clean. He thought of the kitchen sink and the blue willow world. He stepped out of the baptistry and Damyata handed him a big fluffy white towel. He thought of the dish towel in the kitchen. He thought of the baby lamb, He thought of mushrooms wrapped in his father's coat.

The congregation sang loudly, their voices swelling on the early summer breeze, sweeping out into the town, settling over the dusty cars in the parking lot, over the little stucco parsonage.

"Are you washed
In the blood?
In the soul cleansing blood of the lamb?
Are your garments spotless?
Are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?
Are you washed"

CHAPTER SIX

Ralph Dart was too old for television. He dearly loved doing the barn dance for radio and the audience had loved him for years.

But when they turned on the bright lights at WHY-TV, Ralph took out his bandana handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. He stuttered into the microphone; he was always looking into the wrong camera if he looked at all. And Ralph was the star of the show.

In 1955 when the same Iowa farmers who idolized Ralph on radio saw him on TV, they switched channels. They never watched again. If it had been someone else other than Ralph, if the barndancers had not been old friends, they would have laughed, poking each other's ribs at the foolish mistakes and the sloppy nervousness. But Ralph Dart and the Harmonizers weren't somebody else. They were old friends, like the toys of youth. You can't expect your childhood toys to fill your adult needs, but you don't laugh at them. You put them away and treasure them.

That's what happened to the Barn Dance. It didn't last long on television; polished network programs took its place. And the radio show died, too. The station couldn't afford to pay the big staff when the ratings were so low.

Ralph Dart died of cancer; Russ Strawn sold used cars, the Harmonizers drifted apart. Vern Austin played the organ at a local piano shop; Shirley Huston started teaching Home Ec. at Bondurant High School.

The WHY building changed, the new equipment poured in,

and the audience was never the same, but still the fifty thousand watt voice of the middle west brought farm news and country music to Iowa listeners. The old faithfuls, Herb Hedges and Clay Brooks and a few others kept on lending their familiar accents and syllables to the airwaves. And now every car had a radio. Every house had two or three, and every youngster had a transistor. Farmers heard the early morning news in cold barns while they threw down hay and milked the cows and fed the chickens and slopped the hogs. Mailmen carried transistors with them as they walked their appointed rounds. The voice of the middle west traveled more places than ever before.

And on the Fourth of July, 1955 when Claude Hunter, Jr. drove up to the freshly painted pipe fence in front of the parsonage at Calliope, Iowa, his car radio blared the sounds of country music.

Claude slid across the cracked blue plastic seat covers and kissed his bride to be. He was so happy that he wasn't sure what he should do next. Judith was such a beautiful girl, he really preferred to just sit and admire her voluptuous beauty. And he was a little afraid for her to meet Datta and Damyata. He wasn't sure what they would think. Maybe they had seen her at the state school when they had come to visit, but probably not. She was four years younger, and she was seldom involved in the same activities.

Claude stared for a moment at the bank across the street, trying to read the answers to his riddle in the chipped red

bricks of its wall. He watched the sun creep over the roof of the bank. He squinted in its glare, and turned away. Judith was watching him, blue eyes full of wonder, face drawn up in a quizzical smile.

"Is that a bank?" she signed. Her hands were long and lean. Claude loved to read them. Her fingers moved like exotic dancers. Her engagement ring sparkled in the sun.

Claude wanted to smile, to make a joke about the shabby building, because he had seen Judith's prosperous home town in the midst of the rich black farming belt in northern Iowa. But the bank was not funny to him. It was nothing to be taken lightly, even if you were in love and laughed at everything. He didn't know what to say; his hands fumbled in his lap; he tried to spell it out in his mind.

"It's not a bank any more. It was once; it was a good bank. But now it's just my friend. I know a lot about that bank. It knows a lot about me. My dog and I used to sit on that old broken bench, and plan and dream. I have a lot of valuable dreams put away in that old building. It's a good friend."

Claude was out of the car now. The old grey Plymouth Coupe was shining, even in the places where the paint was worn away and the bare metal gleamed dully in the sun. The wide, wide whitewalls were gleaming, too. Claude had worked and worked to make the old buggy shine for Judith. He ran to her door and pulled her out onto the sidewalk, sweeping her breath away and pulling her body next to his in a clumsy

embrace. She smiled and pulled back. She shook her head and laughed and the blonde hair tumbled free. He cupped her head in both hands and pulled her face to his. He tried to smother the teasing white teeth with a kiss. She squirmed in his grip, but she could not or did not slide free.

Calliope on the Fourth of July was a great place for love. The silent lovers were unaware of the constant explosion of firecrackers in and around the town. They felt only the eruptions of their emotions, the trembling explosive flesh, the heat of love in each other's eyes.

Calude waited for a moment when Judith was looking away, caught up in the sparkling light of reflection from a stone on the rock archway before the parsonage. Then he lifted her, cradling her in his arms as if she were a tall, supple, long haired baby. He ran, giggling and panting across the lawn and up the front steps to the wooden front porch. He reluctantly and slowly let her slip to her feet at the door, and they knocked at the worn spot on the screen door.

Rachel had been watching, though she had pretended to dust the front room furniture for at least twenty minutes. She fought back tears, and tried again and again to adjust to the thought of her son, her only son, in love with the beautiful girl on her porch. She watched their playful, puppy like antics, saw the flash of teasing eyes, and fervor of love play. She glanced at the graying woman in her mirror. She looked long and hard into the reflection and changed positions so that she could see Peter sitting in his favorite rocker, his eyes

fixed on the cross atop the church next door. Their lives were wrapped up here in this wall-papered, stucco-faced parsonage. Their youth had fled, spent itself somehow in the clay hills around them.

She opened the door, smiling at the couple. She signed a welcome to the bride to be, and watched the crimson blush rise to Judith's cheeks. She felt somehow smug, but rather ashamed that she had embarrassed the girl. She pulled her close and hugged her. She called to Peter, shouting loud, so he could hear above the radio. She heard the sounds of firecrackers and shuddered. She locked the door behind them, and wondered why she had done it.

It was cool in the front room. The big elms and the Maple tree in the front yard kept the warmest rays from penetrating. There was nearly always a breeze to rustle the leaves and stir the curtains. They talked long and easily. The Benjamins loved this young blonde girl who was soon to be their daughter in law. They sensed that her innocence, her gentle smiles were already part of Calliope, and that her love was the long sought for answer to the emptiness of Claude's life. They talked about the little house next to the feed mill that Elder Cave had fixed up for them to live in. And Rachel said that maybe Judith could work sometimes in Speck's store. Will's arthritis was so bad that he seldom got up from his chair and it was too hard for Grace to do alone. Rachel had been helping when she could, but she was sure that Judith could do a better job.

When the conversation reached a low point Claude suggested that Judith might like a drink of cold Calliope well water. He gathered Judith on one arm and grabbed a bucket with the other, and they walked out into the warmth of the day. Rachel busied herself about the kitchen, gathering utensils to begin preparation for lunch. It was different now. The church had remodeled her kitchen. She had running water, hot and cold. She had a new stove and a new refrigerator with a huge ice freezer shelf on top. It was nice, and it saved her time, but still she missed the old water bucket, and she still kept one filled on the table in the back porch. She liked to think of the hand pumped water as tasting better. There was something of human love and labor in it. If she or Peter or Claude carried the water from the well, it was touched by their love rather than just their machines. In turn, the water tasted sweeter, cleansed better. Perhaps it was silly, but that's still how she felt. And she only drank the water from the back porch bucket, even when the water from the faucet was cooler. On hot days like this one, she took a big tin pitcher full of the well water and kept it cool in the refrigerator. She and Claude were the only ones who would drink it. Water was water to Peter, and besides he was thankful that the church had finally romodeled the kitchen and installed .

Rachel watched Claude and Judith on their way to the well. He was signing to her about the old washhouse where he used to tuck his dog in every night, and where he and

peter kept a few tools and workbench and the snow tires from their cars and all other sorts of junk. The old coal house still had some traces of black lumpy mineral around the edges. There was still kindling stacked in the corner, though the house had been provided with an oil furnace when the remodeling job was completed. Rachel blushed as her son proudly displayed the small wooden outside toilet which which had been deserted for the past year or two since the remodeling. Claude was exhibiting an exaggerated shiver as he told of his cold wintertime visits to the outhouse. Judith laughed, and Rachel knew that the girl had probably never had to use such a facility. She sighed. She was happy for the change in Calliope, but still she longed for the recent past when people still were in contact with the world of nature. She watched as Claude chased Judith around the rock windmill where he had spent so many hours playing as a child. He was threatening to splash her.

Then Rachel heard the firecracker. It was very close to the front of the house. These kids get worse every year, she thought. Calliope must be the worst place in the world for firecrackers on the Fourth of July. If they would just legalize these things in Iowa or make them illegal in Missouri, it would sure help their little town. These kids can drive a few miles down the road to Lineville, cross into Missouri and buy all the fireworks they want. Some of those things are dangerous. Somebody gets hurt almost every year. She shuddered, trying not to remember. She moved to the front

room, pulled back the curtains, and stared at the bank across the street. The lonely rain-streaked windows stared back; there was no sign of life. But she heard the firecrackers again, down the street, blast after blast after blast.

She remembered the hot dusty summer of twenty three years before when she and Peter were beginning their career at Calliope. There were firecrackers then, too.

Between the blasts she could hear Peter's radio drifting through the hollow walls, floating out into the leafy Calliope world. He was listening to his eternal radio; he was addicted to it. She swore that he got messages from God on its dials.

She could smell smoke from someone's Fourth of July trash-pile. Or was it firecrackers? She was running barefoot on the pavement of memory. Peter ran behind.

They were young now and frightened. A firecracker exploded next to Speck's store. Rachel stirred and glanced but her mind was busy running, pulled by the magnetic force of memory.

Out of the yard she ran, past the coalhouse, the well, the windmill, past the smoky trashbarrell into the withered old orchard. Peter ran behind, his face white hot with wonder.

Rachel stared at the sleepy eye like windows of the pink bricked bank. Scenes from the past flashed across their bleary panes. A firecracker echoed from the other side of the church.

Out of the withered valley they ran onto the flame hot highway.

Rachel looked away from the window. She buried her eyes until her fingers pressed tight against sockets. Another firecracker whistled and crashed near Claude's car.

She couldn't block out the memory; it loomed before her, no matter how she pressed her eyes. The car was mangled, green metal crinkled, black tires hissing, bent chrome gleaming. Pieces of glass reflected myriad July sun. The car groaned in metallic agony.

Rachel jumped back against the stucco wall; some little urchin had thrown a firecracker directly onto her porch. It hissed a brief warning then exploded in fiery noisy fragments at her feet.

She was running again. The flames were racing the roadway, tracing the path of gasoline, burning the weeds. Singeing the roadside flowers. She felt the flames clawing at her ankles. She ripped off her blouse and beat at the flames.

She gasped in the smoke, bent low in the ditch, searching. Then she found the baby, his head caught up in a halo of blazing liquid flame. Fire clawed at the innocence of his face.

Pharoah's daughter she thought, and the flame fell away from his face. Firecrackers fell again in rapid succession all around the bank and there was Peter kneeling beside the car over and over his voice belched forth the sounds. At first she thought he was sick but it was a sob, a wretched, pleading, grammophone sob, a stuck needle record pouring automatically out of his throat. Dear God Dear God Dear God.

Rachel pushed the remnants of the firecracker from the porch. She saw boys lighting more firecrackers on the concrete porch at Speck's store.

And the pain rushed back, the remembered pain. The flames lapped angrily around the bare ankles. She wrapped the child in her blouse, laid him at the edge of the roadway, and ran to Peter. She stepped on a piece of glass--the pain flashed again in her mind.

A firecracker exploded in front of the bank.

They pulled the blonde haired man from the car, racing against fire and leaking gasoline. The woman was dead, blood spilling all through her long dark hair, her head tipped forward like a broken flower.

They were moments of course, but they seemed like hours, days. The two of them knelt beside the father and son, trying to bring comfort, trying to think of something besides smoke and fire and blood. They all tried not to watch the flames which now lapped hungrily at the mangled wreckage. But all eight pairs of eyes grew wide with awe as the explosion came, shaking the roadway like an earthquake, strewing bits and pieces of the car in a hail of angry fireworks.

Perhaps the blast acted as some sort of herald angel, some huge voice to call for aid. For suddenly there was a highway patrolman, and townspeople everywhere. A siren screamed in the distance. The roadway was filled with curious people holding their mouths, staring with fear and fright at the scene before them. The ambulance attendants brought a

stretcher for the man, one gathered the child gently into his arms. The patrolman asked Peter and Rachel to ride along in the ambulance so that they too, could be checked for injury at the General Hospital in Des Moines. As if awakening from a stupor, Peter took off his black suit coat and draped it around his wife's shoulders.

Rachel had moved now to the edge of the porch. It was hot and the sun was peeking through the elm trees and climbing toward midday vantage point; still she shuddered as she remembered. She could not shake the memory free. She had to relive it; it played over and over in her mind like a huge revolving record with the needle probing through her consciousness, forcing her to spew forth all of the sounds and fears and emotions of that day which was permanently etched, scratched, recorded in her mind. She hardly heard the eruption of firecrackers on the street.

She was climbing into the ambulance, listening to its fractured scream. She buttoned Peter's coat and found a place as close as possible to the baby.

She was too tall for the ambulance cot, and she could find no comfortable position. Her legs were tender with burns in the very places where they brushed against the edge of the cot.

The ambulance was climbing the long hill outside Leon when Hunter opened his eyes. They were like cold blue rivets, fastening themselves like leeches on Peter's face. You are a preacher, aren't you? The question seemed strangely

rhetorical. The voice was calm, composed, very resonant;
it sounded like a radio set in fine tune.

His voice trailed away; pain swept across his face.

The pale face grew white. The deep blue eyes fought
to stay open. They fixed themselves in a hard blue stare.
Hunter asked the Benjamins to raise his son as their own, but
begged them to let him keep his own name.

"Tell him that his daddy was a radio announcer, one of
the first in the business, and make him proud of his name."

Rachel remembered how the voice had trailed away, how
she had watched Peter shift his gaze to the kaleidoscope of
images floating by the ambulance window.

The voice came back to her, whispering like the maple
branches in the front yard. "What are we, after all," he
said." But a name, a name and a voice?"

Then the voice was gone.

A youngster walked by the yard and hurled a firecracker
into the iris bed. A tall beautiful flower fell beneath the
blast.

Rachel saw it again, the horrible ripping and rupturing
of metal and fabric and flesh and blood. She remembered
staring into the baby's eyes, seeing first herself, then the
image of the child's mother, the flowing rich brown hair was
splotched with blood. She was too beautiful to die, Rachel
thought, too young, too needed. She saw the mangled car
again, smelled the gasoline, but something toyed at her mind
like a forgotten name or face or place that won't come back

to the surface of the visible horizon. Something was out
of place, not quite real or right. She pursued it through
the recesses of tender emotion like a cautious skater on the
winter's first ice. She skimmed and skimmed, afraid to go too
far.

The heat of the day crept about her ankles, and rose
like smoldering smoke about her. She was thirsty, aware of
words forming in her dry mouth, aware that she had found it,
found the memory after all these years. She was about to
call out, about to speak when she saw Claude and Judith be-
fore her. Claude held a tin cup of water to her.

She saw the front seat of the mangled convertible again,
saw the woman's head tipped forward in death, smelled the
ominous gasoline. But now she knew, now she knew. She saw a
remnant of a big old Missouri firecracker on the seat of that
convertible. And the firecracker had caused its own little
eruption of violence, burning and scarring and pitting the
mohair fabric. She knew and she could not forget.

"It was a firecracker, Claude," she signed. Then she
took the cup and drank long and slowly from the cool metallic
liquid. She wondered if the blast was the last thing her
son ever heard.

She gathered up her dress and walked into the coolness
of the house where Peter still listened to his radio, obliv-
ious to the world around him. She finished the preparation
of lunch. Judith moved beside her, silent, supple, helpful.

After lunch Claude went outside to wait for Judith.

He was happy, very happy, but he still looked forward to moments by himself. He walked around the yard, noting the changes which time had brought to his home, realizing that this would be his last holiday at home before he established his own home and family. He walked out to the old elm in the backyard. The huge grapevine which hung from the tree was once a rope like swing on which he spent many hours. Now it hung slovenly, weary, heavy. It spoke of old age. Claude almost expected his dog to come running, but he had learned that bitter lesson of loss, too. He remembered how he and Datta had put the body in the trunk of the car, gathered up shovels and carried the dog to a burial place near the old pond on McConnell's farm. Claude wiped away a tear just thinking about it.

He walked by the washhouse. He wondered if anything remained of his stick men, but the dull memories were not worth a search. He smiled to think of the games and inventions of his youth. He examined the big gnarled buckeye tree near the back corner of the parsonage. It was a remnant of what it once was, most of its tired old branches stripped in high winds. It clung to life, but there were few leaves. Clumps of small branches grew out the bottom of the trunk, but the branches on top were barren, as if the old trunk were too weary to suck the water up the trunk. Claude wondered at the changes of just a few years. They had gone so rapidly.

He paused by the iris bed next to the driveway. He stooped to pull weeds from the border of the bed. The shingles

which covered the outside of Speck's store were starting to peel. The windows needed washing. There was plenty of work for Judith to do all right.

His father's car sat in the driveway, parked always in the same spot. Like so many aspects of his father's life, the car was always parked in exactly the same way in exactly the same spot. In winter, there were perfect tire marks where the car remained. It was never allowed to vary its pattern. The Pontiac was green, plain ugly green. Claude thought that it looked like a big green ugly skunk with the stripes of chrome moving up the hood and down the trunk. The car was dirty. It nearly always was except when Rachel or Claude washed it. Peter thought that cars were for driving, for transportation and nothing else. The red clay dust of Calliope had settled on the hood and trunk. Red clay mud had sloshed onto the doors and finders. Even the windows were dirty with mud and ~~dust~~. The car was three years old, but it looked older than Claude's '48 Plymouth. The boy wondered if he would ever stop caring about his car. If he could ever stand to have dirt and dust and grime collect on it like Datta did. Maybe it's part of growing older, Claude thought. When you get older you can afford newer things, but they don't mean as much to you as the old things that you had to work so hard to make shine, so they would look new when they weren't. It's a funny world.

He walked to the front fence, put his hand on the top of the pipe, and vaulted over automatically as he had done so

many times in his youth. He looked at his Plymouth coupe, gray and gleaming in the afternoon sun. He saw the car set against the backdrop of the old deserted bank. He grew mellow. The bank held many memories, but it too, faded, shrank from the light of Calliope more each day. The car looked like a bright shining comet in contrast.

He opened the door and sat inside, smelling the familiar and pleasant odors of that which was his. He absorbed the smell of sunlight on plastic seat covers. The steering wheel had once been white. It was huge, and he stroked it as if it were a pet. He turned the wheel a bit to the right and then to the left. He made the picture of the Mayflower on the horn button come upright. He always ~~took~~ special efforts to see that the ship was upright wehn he parked the car. Things seemed to go better when the ship was resting easy. The ship spoke its own message in symbol to the boy. It was very old, very important, but solid like the rock at Plymouth. He sometimes shared thoughts with the Mayflower that he hadn't shared with anything since Claw. That ship had been the first to know of his love for Judith. It was the first to know that he had bought the sparkling engagement ring. He looked at the funny little windshield wiper button that sat in the middle of the dash, just at the point where the chrome strip divided the two halves of the windshield wiper button that sat in the middle of the dash, just at the point where the chrome strip divided the two halves of the windshield. He studied the curious dashboard dials. He loved the little

speedometer needle with the red tipped end. He studied the odometer.

He turned the switch on and reached over to push the middle button of his push button radio dial tuner. Then he turned the volume switch on. He pushed the buttons on the dial and watched the frequency finder needle jump back and forth on the dial. He pushed the middle button again and brought the frequency finder back to WHY. He put his hands on the dash board where there were nice little slots for noise to escape from the speaker. He felt the beat of music and turned the volume up. He turned on the windshield wipers and watched them move back and forth to the beat he felt in his fingers. He remembered how he used to sleep as a boy, his hands draped over the radio, touching the ebb and flow of its pulse, wondering at the tickling, the fertile feel of it all, smiling at the purring sensation, the touch of life in his hands. The music stopped and the talking began. The beat was over, the modulation was different, the tickling was changed; the pulse of talking was not as interesting as the pulse of music. He turned off the wipers; he drummed his fingers on the dashboard. He saw Judith bouncing out the front door, blonde hair shining; she smiled wide with anticipation, her whole body smiled, eager to walk, to share embraces, to kiss. He watched her rushing to him; he turned up the radio dial, and felt the rush of volume flow into his hand. He knew that their love was something like that, something humming, ticklish, and live, live, live in their chests

and hearts and body cavities, something warm and moist and kind like flowers and grapevines and old banks and radios. He reached for the transistor radio on the seat beside him, set the dial for WHY and turned it up as loud as he could. He thrilled to feel the equal throbbing, melting through his body, traveling from one arm to the other, crisscrossing somewhere through his heart, and for that moment, that eternal moment, he held Judith, the child become woman, the young partner of his life, the silent creature of his affections, held caught in those rushing breathless summer footsteps with the bridal wreath and rock archway framing her intense personal beauty. She was caught there, transfixed, etched upon his mind by some giant needle, which recorded, tattooed, injected the disc of his mind with overflowing love. He thought the moment would never pass; he didn't really want it to. He hoped in the hollow of his mind that the throbbing, surging, breathless anticipation could always be, that he could always feel as he felt now, that the little tickling waves could and would always merge so perfectly with his heart. That Judith could stay trapped and lovely like a beautiful flower in his heart. He wanted somehow to be able to turn on the radio, set the dial for WHY, and find her there, breathless, breasts heaving, mouth open in anticipation. He wanted it to be, and he knew it could not be, but he could not pull his hands away from the magnets which held him. He felt his hands tremble. He stared at them, wondering at the words which flowed through them, through him, unheard, unknown.

He knew they were words, he just didn't know what the words were. His fingers twitched as if they would interpret if they could, like a blind man reading braille. Judith was standing at the car window. Her face spoke many questions. Her smile pried him loose from magnetic attraction. He turned off the switch to the Plymouth. He checked to make sure that the Mayflower was upright on the waters. He gathered up the transistor. He slammed the door shut and ran to her freshness. He breathed in the perfume, felt the wind blow her hair across his face. He held her warmth close to his. They leaned together across the heat of the old Plymouth, smiling at the distorted image of their embrace in the windshield of the car. They were bright and shining and smiling, and they held each other closer, throbbing to the magnetic fascination of the flesh, trembling to the thrill and pull of wave after wave of body heat.

Claude took the transistor, turned the volume switch as loud as he could, and placed it in the hollow of Judith's breasts, then he locked his arms around her warm body, pushing her tight against the old Plymouth. The radio shouted its message to their bodies, pulsated its waves into the chambers of their hearts, but they remained oblivious to the words, their bodies pulsating, erupting to the message of the Fourth of July heat in Calliope.

They turned to see their images in the faded eyes of the bank windows. They could tell themselves apart in the image, but they seemed locked as one, growing out of the Plymouth,

growing out of the bridal wreath, the rock archway, growing out of the pink stucco parsonage which loomed and trembled in the wavy distance of the windows. They looked from one window to the other. They opened their embrace to see if the throbbing radio gave off any special image, any picture, however distorted. All they saw was the flicker of reflection when the radio fell from the sanctuary of their locked breasts.

Claude reached to catch the radio, watching his hand move in the rain stained window. He caught the little black plastic box, just as it reached the sidewalk, just before the point of impact. He held it there, caught in the act of saving its sound, his hand trembling at his heroism, his human skills. He saw his hand, clutching the box, the dials, the tiny buttons, watched its exaggerated reflection in the concave reflection of the shiny Plymouth hubcap. He held the radio to the shiny reflection, touching the black box to the red reproduction of the Mayflower at the center of the disc. He touched it and pulled it away. He touched it and pulled it away. He stood and kissed his bride.

"The Mayflower is upright on the hubcap," he signed. She smiled. She wasn't sure what he meant, but that didn't really matter. He handed her the radio, keeping his hand on one end. She grasped the radio, too, letting her hand slip under the edge of his. And together, hand in hand, with the pulsation of the radio between them, they walked down the blacktop street toward their own little Calliope house.

The pavement was spongy in the afternoon heat. They could

feel the heat creeping through the soles of their shoes, rising in little waves about their ankles. Claude wondered if heat made noise, too. If there was a different sound for the warm oozy pavement of summer, if it had different sound for the warm oozy pavement of summer, if it had different voice from the cold, crisp hard stones of winter. He wondered if the green grass sounded different than the cold stiff snow. He rubbed Judith's hand with his thumb and smiled.

Findley Reese drove by the two young lovers; he slowed to sign a greeting of hello. He prided himself in learning the elements of communication with the deaf. He puzzled, however, over the voice of the radio. He cruised near to them in his new Dodge Royal. The car was a brilliant two tone royal blue and white. He loved it, loved knowing that it was the only new car in Calliope, loved his position of relative wealth in the community. His house was the only two story in the community. He had purchased it from Wilbur Love when the old man had to make ends meet after the bank crash. His father had covered the house with stucco, the same pink and white stucco that marked the bungalow at the edge of town, and the parsonage. He felt that his new Dodge was the truest reflection of his character. If there was royalty in Calliope, he was it. He and his father had held the town together during the depression. His county maintenance shop was the biggest employer in town. His two farms in the country between Calliope and Allerton were the best hay producers in the area. They had been in the Reese family

for years.

Now he cruised beside the young deaf couple, listening to the broadcast of radio station WHY. It was a sermon. He listened closely. It was the voice of his niece in Des Moines, Hope Whispers. Audie was giving his introduction to her portion of the program.

"And now here is my darling wife Hope to read today's correspondence. We have so many letters from our listening audience. We try to answer each one, and we rely upon our friends in radio land to keep our program on the air. Let's hear what our listeners have to say."

Findley smiled to hear his niece reading the letter of hope and trust from a listener in Mt. Ayr. "My prayers have been answered," she read. "I thank God every day for Audie Whispers and his prayer tower. And every time I go to Des Moines, I drive by the Household of God, just looking at the majesty of that tower. I think God himself must come down and bless that tower with his blessed love. We pray for you every day. Please accept this gift of love for \$100.00."

Findley stopped the car. He watched Claude and Judith walk together, hand in hand, radio blaring, to the old deserted bandstand in the middle of a little square at the edge of the town. Their little house sat across the street from the bandstand. Findley remembered how years ago folks gathered here on the Fourth of July and some folks brought instruments. Everybody would sing and play, and have a picnic together to celebrate the Fourth. But now the bandstand was in need of

paint. The grass needed trimming about the edges of the concrete floor that Findley's father had laid so many years ago. The two lovers stood embracing in the bandstand. He watched Claude put the radio between them as they came together in embrace. Findley reached for the radio dial, and frowned while the tubes warmed. He moved the dial selector to make sure that it was set on WHY. The voice of Audie Whispers boomed inside the Dodge Royal, and Findley could see a picture of his friend, looming large in his mind. No doubt the preacher was wearing a loud suit, tan shoes, pink shoe laces. Maybe he even wore a polka dot vest. He was flamboyant, too flashy for Findley, but he loved the boy anyway, and he felt a magnetic fascination as he heard the voice float and drift, and reverberate in his new car. He heard the voice extended in the Calliope bandstand. He watched the lovers, sharing moments of precious tenderness together.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, it is prayer time in the Household of God. Members of the Household of God staff are standing at this very moment on the prayer tower, joined in a precious prayer circle, united in love for you. I'm going to offer a special prayer for you, today, and I want you to join me wherever you are within the sound of my voice. Jesus said wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there are at least four of us, Hope, Jesus you and I. And there are thousands others listening to my voice who join in this prayer. And our friends on the prayer tower transmit the power of our thoughts to you. Join us now. Find yourself a

point of contact. Put your hand on the radio. Touch someone in the room with you. Let's all pray together."

Findley Reese, leading elder of the Calliope Christian Church sat in his new blue and white Dodge Royal with his hand on the radio speaker. But he didn't bow his head. He stared instead at the tall bald man who held hands with the pretty blonde girl who was soon to be his bride. Findley stared at the transistor radio they held in their hands, its black face, its tiny dials peeping out from their fingers. He stared at the radio and wondered about Calliope. He stared at the young silent couple and thought about all of the celebrations of old Calliope, all of the noise grown silent, all of the dreams which had faded and peeled like the paint on the bandstand.

His hand was still on the radio when the voice of Clay Brooks said:

"This is radio station WHY, the fifty thousand watt voice of the middle west."

He turned off the dial. He heard firecrackers in the distance. He decided to drive out to his farm. He watched the young couple as they walked across the little patch of green with a teeter totter and a swing which everybody called the park. The bandstand was empty now. Findley drove away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joe Heidel from Houston, Texas was an ex-Marine sharp shooter. He and his friend, Hawker Lee from Monroeville, Alabama travelled with Twentieth Century Shows. Together they ran the Rifle Range, target shop for those who fancied themselves expert marksmen. Prospective marksmen plunked down 50 cents and tried to shoot all of the red out of a little red heart target ten feet away. The range used B. B. guns.

Heidel and Lee had been buddies in the Marines. They knew everything you could know about weapons, and they liked watching people shoot at targets. Occasionally they would take the guns when disgruntled customers complained about the impossibility of what at first seemed an easy task. Shooting out the hearts was child's play for them. They had been marine snipers. And they knew that they were amongst the best.

They set up the canvas booth at the Iowa State Fair midway and set up some of their stuffed animals to see if any of the other workmen on the grounds wanted to try their hand at the targets. It was preparation day. A few residents of the city drifted here and there on the grounds. Most of the booths and barns and shops and rides were ready by now. It was slightly after noon. The men basked in the bright Iowa sun, scouting the area for customers to try out the range. Hawker Lee pulled his hat down over his eyes, and stroked his beard. He watched the sparse crowd, thinking about the throngs who would flood the place tomorrow.

Claude Hunter had finished his job at the sheep barn. Lou McConnell handed him a note saying that a man who was going to get married should not smell like a sheep barn. Claude had laughed, walking off across the grounds that he knew so well. He wanted to see if there was anything new on midway. He walked across the green, by the bandstand, and stopped to buy a nut covered ice cream bar, before he went to midway. He munched on the bar, hungrily absorbing all of the sights he saw. By the time he had reached the rifle range, there was nothing left but the stick. He chewed it thoughtfully as he read the signs and looked over the men in charge.

"Oh No," Hawker said. "It's the bald headed dead eye. He came early this year. What do you say, Baldy? Maybe you lost your touch, eh? Get out the prizes, Joe. This guy never misses. Sure doesn't talk much. One of these farm hicks, who grew up in a corn field. Cow must have eaten his tongue or something. I like that hairdo though. It makes him look like the president. I think I'll start calling him Ike. And if he comes around here too often, I'm gonna get my BB out and assassinate the guy. I mean he can clean this place out if he wants too."

Claude put down fifty cents on the counter. He picked up the gun from its rack and aimed at the cleavage of the heart. He moved his gun like a big pencil around the edge of the heart clockwise. He carved a perfect heart from the target, never once missing his mark, moving with perfect consistency. Hawker and Joe kept up a constant chatter,

shouting now and then to distract his attention, but Claude paid absolutely no attention to their antics. When he had finished, he pointed to a stuffed fluffy lamb on the shelf behind Hawker.

"Get lost baldy," Hawker said, tossing the lamb across he counter. "Hey were you ever in the Marines? You remind me of my DI. He was a chromedome too."

Claude hurried off towards the Household of God, unmindful of the insults hurled behind him. He tucked the lamb inside the front of his overalls. He turned on his transistor radio, feeling the music in his fingertips as he walked across the grounds.

At four o'clock on the Household of God prayer tower Audie Whispers and Peter Benjamin stood, minister's manuals in hand, waiting for the rest of the small wedding party to arrive. They looked out over the fairgrounds at the flurry of activity below. It was a very satisfying experience. Peter was always fascinated with the tower. Directly below them, he saw workmen erecting the big prayer tent for the crowd who came daily to hear Audie preach from the big platform which extended from the back of the Household of God building. It ran right up to the top of the eight foot high woven wire fence which was the border for the grounds.

Audie and his singers and his guest speakers and all of those who wished to be healed did their bits upon the stage, and an overflow crowd of fair goers always flocked to the tent to witness the events. There were always the noisy skeptics

and more often than not a drunk or two, but most of the crowd was made up of people who heard the daily Audie Whispers show on WHY. They came to see their flashy flamboyant healer man, and to hear him preach.

Peter looked at his friend, the healing preacher. The years had been good to Audie. His brown wavy hair was starting to gray at the temples. He stood now, staring off into the distance, as if absorbed in the bright gold domed horizon. Audie was a big man, a former semi pro football player; they had called him "the Bull" when he smashed through the line. He had added a bit of weight around the middle, but he still struck a very handsome pose in his crisp white suit, gleaming like the herald angel in the painting over the piano in the church back home. This was Audie's special occasion suit. Everything was white: tie, shirt, shoes. His tan face and hands stood out in sharp relief.

And Peter, who was not ordinarily given to such speculation, looked at his own scuffed black shoes and shiny black suit. Though it troubled him very little to contemplate the differences, he realized, perhaps for the first time, how very different they were. And as he looked beyond Audie to the city in the distance and the fairgrounds below, he realized how very different Audie was from the stock and staple Iowans who stood fascinated by his preaching. He saw the endless pickups and stock trucks pouring over the viaduct and onto the side streets to enter the grounds and find their ways to the barns and the campgrounds. He saw the railyard below the

viaduct, heard the busy whistles of the yard engines, watched the intricate movements of the myriad railed cars, being shifted and moved here and there like sheep in a pen. He watched the free flow of traffic over the viaduct, and shifted his gaze again to the rail bound vehicles. He thought of Claude and Judith. That's the difference, he thought. The rest of us move freely in our world. We can manipulate and move in whatever direction we want. But the deaf world is fixed. We herd them about like sheep, shove them here and there on rails. They can go only so far, maybe some excel, some truly succeed, but for the most part their bounds are set, their destinies charted like railroad cars. They are part of our world; we even take them for granted, but only a very few understand them. I wish I could reach down with some giant hand and set Claude and Judith into the world of hearing, reach down from this tower and move that rail car off that track and put it on that street, and say now you are free, now you are mobile, now you can move freely amongst us, flow freely through even the most intricate alleys.

Peter turned and stared for a long moment at the giant WHY tower at the other end of the fairgrounds. It loomed above the grounds, flexing mechanical muscles, dwarfing all that stood below. Audie, too, was staring at the tower. He raised both hands as if he were trying to cup the face of the tower in his hands.

I know it cannot be done, Peter thought. Even Audie in his bright angelic suit can work no such miracle. The deaf

world is fixed, charted, mapped. There is no stepping off the track, no exploring of back alleys. But maybe the greater miracle would be the reaching out of some giant hand to take us all into that world of silence, to take us away from the momomaniac world of noise. Perhaps we are the rail bound ones, perhaps we cannot move freely in the real world because we are forced to run on our little grooved rails of sound. We are driven, pushed, shoved by noise, sound, static. We are herded, dragged about the world by our ears.

Peter heard voices from the church yard below. He looked down to see Judith's father, a sun glazed farmer from Goldfield, glance nervously at first his watch and then the tower. His blue suit was baggy and he hated the tie around his neck. To tell the truth, he didn't think too much of climbing up on that tower, but he would do most anything for his daughter. Peter watched his bald head turn slowly in a little semicircle as he scanned the crowds of people who were beginning to fill the grounds. Days, yes, years in the sun had created an interesting pattern of colors on the man's head, not untypical of many farmers. The face was red, ruddy, as if scaled by liquid sun and buffed by wind. A fringe of graying hair encircled the scalp, just above the ear. The scalp itself was pink and shiny with just enough fuzzy hair to give the appearance of a tiny new born child. It looked as though the years of putting on and taking off of caps, the wiping of sweat from the brow backwards across the scalp, had worn thin the once abundant hair. And the boundary was so pronounced that it looked to Peter as if the Lord himself had said to the sun in an

extended game that had lasted many summers. "You may take the face, may burn your image into his eyes, onto his cheeks. But you can go no further. This region is mine. This you cannot violate; this you cannot touch."

And Peter looked out onto the fairgrounds, saw Judith's father recreated a dozen times, moving about the barn areas, throwing down bales of straw and hay, tying animals to hitch-posts, climbing out of stocktrucks, shoveling manure. They and their counterparts in comfortable bib overalls and jeans and wash pants and coveralls and flannel shirts and tee shirts and undershirts with no sleeves were sweating and straining in the heat and humidity to make the final preparations for the big show in Iowa agriculture. They were unaware of the black coated watchman on the tower. They were just men doing their job, just like they had always done it.

At four fifteen, the appointed time, Claude and Judith stood below the JESUS SAVES and looked at the man in white and the man in black who both held little black books, pregnant with words and meanings. Claude could see the sheep barn in the distance. He held the fleecy stuffed lamb in his hand and smiled at Judith. She was very beautiful in the white lace gown. He touched the gown with the lamb, comparing textures and shades. She smiled, but she was nervous. Her mother stood beside Audie. Rachel stood beside Peter. The service began.

"Dearly Beloved," said Audie Whispers.

"Dearly Beloved," signed Rachel and Mrs. Flowers. They signed in perfect harmony. It was a beautiful sight to watch.

"Do you, Claude Hunter, jr., take this woman, Judith Flowers, to be your wedded wife?" asked Peter.

The hands moved with special dignity, or so it seemed to Claude. There were some gestures, movements, perhaps vibrations of Damyata's hands which could bring true dignity. He looked at his own hands. He touched Judith's hand with his. Then he signed, "I do."

On the grounds below a small crowd had gathered in the late afternoon August heat to watch the proceedings on the tower. Perhaps it was the wedding gown. Perhaps it was Audie in his bright white suit. It was a show worth watching, and the crowd grew.

Two workmen from midway stopped to see why everybody was looking up at the JESUS SAVES cross. Soon they, too, were caught up in the strange pageantry on the tower, the blacks and white, and the women making signs with their hands.

"Hey, Hawker, look. It's Baldy, Baldy the dead eye. He's getting married up there. He's getting married, can you beat that? What a wierd place to get married." Hawker stroked his beard. "It takes all kinds," he said. "Look at that will ya, he's holding that lamb he got at the stand. GEEZ, I hope he doesn't have a rifle up there. Wouldn't that be a perfect spot for a sniper, man? Wow, what a spot for pickin em off!"

Hawker Lee looked back up to the tower just in time to see Judith throw her bridal bouquet out to the crowd. Emil

Flowers could not resist throwing handfulls of rice down onto the crowd. He laughed like a school boy. Hawker Lee ducked away.

Everyone left the tower but the three of them. The crowd of curiosity seekers drifted off into machinery exhibit tents, and hog barns, and sawdust floored restaurants. The sun moved farther down the sky over Des Moines. The tower cast a long shadow into the grounds, reaching across the fence, pointing like a huge black finger toward the radio tower to the east. The sun played tricks on Audie's white suit; sometimes the fabric seemed to glisten and shine as if transformed by new found energy of its own radiance. Claude and Judith were waiting for Audie to leave. They wanted to be alone on the tower, to absorb those last few moments of their day together, to watch the sun fall into the great basin of their city, to catch the fragments of its fall, and store them in the pockets of memory. But the man in white had long since forgotten the lover's world. He was oblivious to their frustration. He was listening to a great and mighty voice which spoke to his eyes and his hands, and even his throat, his tongue. The voice was myriad, many hued, more magnificent than anything he had ever heard before. He tried again and again to capture it with his hands, but they were insignificant measure, like buckets against the force of an ocean. He could not capture the words, only the voice; his eyes and hands cried out, but his throat was mute, fixed, stopped in

his throat. He wanted to cry out, to shout, but the pressure of the voice was too great, the sound too onrushing. He could only grasp at syllables and letters, and he tried again and again to catch them as they rushed by in the heat of the August light. He felt bloated, stretched taut, as if impregnated by a virile wave of endless sound.

Then the words fell in little liquid droplets of flame into his outstretched hands, and the sounds fled out his great white body, deflating his lungs. He shouted long and loud into the heat of the afternoon, but only a few farmers in faded overalls turned curious faces to the tower. Claude thumbed through the pages of Judith's wedding Bible. He held the white cover of the book to her breast, and compared the fabric, wondered at the difference in hue. He watched Audie Whispers climb down from the tower; his white suit clean. Judith clutched the stuffed lamb. She stroked the soft wool.

Claude watched over the railing until he was sure that Audie had touched the ground. Then he ran to Judith. He handed her the white Bible; she clutched the Bible and the Lamb to her wedding white dress, and he lifted her, his hands about her brocade white waist, to the cross above them. He lifted her with mighty silent strength on his sacred tower. He lifted her until her face blocked out the JESUS and he read JUDITH saves. Then, he shifted his body, and held her aloft, his own face gleaming red with heat and love and exertion. He looked at the sign and blocked out the SAVES

with her face, and he read JESUS JUDITH. And he pulled her down to his body, feeling the strength of the tower rise up within him. He pulled her close to his pulsating August heat, lamb, Bible, gown and all. He pulled her tender white body to his own. He thought of mushrooms; flesh of my flesh, he thought.

The sun slipped closer to the great gold domes of the capital building. The extended shadow of the tower crept farther into the rich green lawn of the fairgrounds.

Judith took the corsage from her breast. She pulled the flowers apart, handing some to Claude. She tugged at his hand. They walked to the railing and looked out on the fine green lawn below. She began plucking petals, very slowly. Then she let them fall from the tower's edge, fleeting, filtering through the heat of the day, far, far through the August heat to the ground below. The two lovers moved around the perimeter of the tower, casting petals to the wind, watching the late afternoon sun create its own design of myriad shapes on the green carpet below. They watched the shadows of themselves, far, far into the green lawn, tossing down droplets of love.

And when all the petals had flown, when the last shower of summer snow sifted down, the lovers came slowly down from the prayer tower.

Peter stood by the window of the living room of Audie's parsonage, watching the shower of petals drift to the ground. He held the telephone in his hand, waiting for a voice to come

over the wire.

"Pastor Benjamin"" the operator questioned, her voice young, practiced, mechanical.

"Yes, this is Peter Benjamin," Peter replied. The black phone looked like an extension of his suit. He stared out the window, watching a goldfinch dart across the lawn.

"Your party is on the line, now Mr. Speck. Go ahead please."

"Peter, is that you, Peter?" The old man's voice crackled over the wire.

"What's the matter, Will? Is something wrong? Has something happened?"

"Can you come Ho-o-ome, Peter?" His voice cracked again, as if trying to stand up under some great strain. The voice broke away from syllables and into sobs. The great liquid waves of grief swept across the wire, across the miles, and fell crashing on Peter's ears. It weakened Peter to hear the liquid exhalations of grief. He knew. He had heard too much grief to miss it. The sobs were too real, too racking, too powerful. It had to be Gracie.

The old man could not find his voice. He felt something rising in his throat, but it was not a voice, not a voice that could speak in syllables. He gripped the old wall phone with both arthritic hands. His body shook. He thought he might pull the phone off the wall.

Peter watched the yellow finch and its olive mate dart in and out of the thicket near the church. There were tears in

his eyes.

Then Will found voice again. It was cracked, swollen; a stranger to his ears, but it was rising up out of his throat like smoke from the smoldering, smothered fire in his chest. Peter could not tell if the voice was changed by distance, somehow warped by time and miles. He stared at the black instrument on the table, ran his eyes around and around in the little circle used for repeated dialings. His mind ran round and round in grooved circles. He tried to catch on to something comforting to say to his old friend. But he found no voice for the words. He listened to the old man's words, flowing now like a mountain stream swollen with melted snow.

"I don't know if I can go on Peter. I have no will to live without her she was everything, everything I've known or done or thought or felt for fifty three years Gracie's gone just gone so fast she called me at the store said she had a surprise wanted to know if there was anybody there and then she said come on over home I got a surprise for you come and see I just walked out of the store and left it I haven't been back. Her voice was so sweet she was always so sweet she was teasing me she wanted to surprise me she was always full of surprises she baked a cherry pie you know how I love cherry pies she baked a cherry pie it was still hot from the oven I could smell it when I came in the back door her voice was so sweet I smelled the pie and I expected her to say something but she didn't and I saw her sitting in the chair and I waited for her to say something but she didn't she was just sitting

in the chair with a smile on her face and I didn't think anything of it at first I wondered why she didn't come and hug me like she always did her voice..."

The sobs rolled in again. The old man stepped back from the phone, leaned against the wall and wept huge bitter waves of his agony. He looked across the room at his wife, the body now crumpled onto the kitchen table, the steam still rising from the pie she had baked..

"Come home, Peter, come home soon. I'm too lost without my grace; the glimmer, the brightness has gone out of my life her voice was so sweet she saved me from so much trouble, spared me the trouble of so many little things and big things too I'm lost Peter I'm a lost lonely old man my Grace is gone what can I do without her?"

Peter felt the power rise in his throat, felt his comfort flow into the phone and onto the wire to Calliope. He didn't know what he said, but he knew that the words worked their salve on the old man's agony. Will was listening, absorbing the voice, more than the words, taking in the sounds, swallowing them whole, hoping to digest them later. He felt like a giant sponge, soaking up the flow of comfort, like a desert traveller at an oasis.

And when Peter stopped, the cracked voice came back again onto the wire, trying hard, struggling with itself to speak meaning. But the voice fell away into the throat again, doing battle with the lungs and the tears. Peter thought of Will's huge old gramophone with a hand crank. Sometimes when the

record wasn't cranked enough the needle would produce strange, slow, animalistic sounds that were like early primitive language. He knew that the old man was fighting for supreme control of his voice. He waited. Then he spoke again, reminding Will to call Chrystal Gottschalk right away, reassuring the old man that he would be home as soon as he could.

And the old voice came back strong. Not as strong as it had been; Peter knew that it would never be so strong again. And as he hung up the phone, placing the mouthpiece on its cradle, he saw Claude and Judith walk across the lawn toward the house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was hot in studio C at radio station WHY in Des Moines . Clay Brooks was finishing the newscast. Perspiration ran down his face. He dabbed at it with his handkerchief and kept reading.

"Record crowds are expected at tomorrow's opening day of the Iowa State Fair. Judging will be conducted in several categories of livestock at the fair. Stock car races are scheduled for the afternoon's entertainment at the grandstand. Lawrence Welk will present two evening performances."

His voice moved on through the news. He turned the pages, letting his voice project the words into the microphone. It was hard work, harder than anyone imagined, because the brain had always to be sharply honed, the voice had always to be filled with authority, the lips could never falter, the tongue could never slip. He was a professional. He prided himself in few errors. He was hard on his younger colleagues who liked to joke about the mistakes they made on the air. Clay never joked about a mistake.. He brooded sometimes for weeks about little slips that few people ever noticed. He read constantly aloud to himself. He was his own best critic.

He poured himself into the microphone, letting his voice swell out of the heart of his body, letting his breath escape into the microphone, laden with his tissue, his cells, his being. He read the words, but he offered himself, poured out his voice as a little offering of himself to the great towering god of radio, and to the thousands of ears and hearts and minds that listened to his words. He read on and on .

"President John F. Kennedy has ordered an extensive investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency. He ordered the investigation after reviewing information provided by a special justice department investigation. The Presidential Commission to investigate CIA activities will release its report to the President by the end of November."

The news travelled into living rooms, restaurants, bars. The voice of Clay ~~Brook~~stravelled to the tents at the State Fair Grounds, to the motels already filling with visitors to the 1963 Iowa State Fair. Clay sometimes thought of the miles his voice travelled, of the numbers and types of people who listened to his readings. And now that the news was over, now that the reading was finished he slumped over the table and stared at the microphone, now grown cold before him. He had seen its face so many times, had stared into the myriad holes, wondering which hole was the tunnel for the real Clay Brooks, wondering what happened to the voice which fled into the chambers of this instrument.

He stared now, his hands on both ears, his tie loose about his neck, his shirt unbuttoned, his body perspiring. He remembered the years spent before the microphone, the thousands of times his voice had said "This is radio station WHY, the fifty thousand watt voice of the Middle West." Perhaps he had said it a thousand times, perhaps a million; it had become part of his body processes, like breathing, exhaling, perspiring, excreting. It seemed to ooze from his being. He had said it so many times that he actually felt

himself to be part of the microphone, part of the tower, part of the turntables, the studio.

Perhaps, he thought, this is the most important thing that ever happens to me. This extension of voice, this projection of my being may be my finest achievement. He tapped the dead microphone, listened to its dull reply.

He stared at the wedge shaped face, at the little WHY tag worn like a bow tie about its throat. The face was filled with a multitude of tiny pencilchaped holes. He could hear Orson Shelton talking to the program director in the next studio, could hear the network program in progress over Orson's receiving set, could hear the commercials being cut in studio A, but he was no longer in the studio. He had soared far out over the city of Des Moines, far over the junction of the two rivers at the city's mid section, far out into the suburbs and the corn fields beyond.

Like a radio wave, part of him had entered into one of those multitudinous holes in the microphone, into that metal wedge, and the myriad of them, the whole congregation of waves were being transmitted, beamed, force fed across acres and acres of Iowa corn, across dirt road bridges, and clay dammed ponds, across roof after gray roof to radio set after radio set. And the voices and the power and the glow thereof caused curious little yellow bulbs to flicker, and strange little dials to glow with the voices creeping out of this studio in this city in this year of 1963.

Old ladies alone with their crocheting and young boys

dreaming in room after room after room heard those voices, stared at those flickering bulbs and wondered and listened and memorized and wondered why they did. Will a bit of Clay Brooks lodge there in some strange home, trapped in someone's memory? Has something of what he was stayed behind, lodged, committed to the prison of someone else's mind because the sound moves so freely, races so gracefully over the waves? Does it linger? This magnified voice? Does some element of its fabric remain? Can it ever return?

And what of Herb Hedges and Jack Rhiner, and all the bright young disc jockeys? What of Audie Whispers? How much of them is lodged to build like bits of sand carried by a river of waves, lapping against the edges of someones else's mind? Do they gradually pour out, bit by bit, particle by particle, the elements of their inner selves, the forces of their own personalities until they become only microphones, themselves blond and mustached, and looped around with bow ties that say WHY in big bold letters?

Do they become just microphones after so long? Do they just capture and discharge the tiny fragments of living which are caught up in sound and transmit it, sow it, scatter it like so much seed into the waiting pockets of the patient listening populace? Do the seeds of their voice grow within someone else's mind to make him something different from what he had been? Is it possible that a listener may grow to think more like Clay Brooks than Clay Brooks himself does?

He tapped the microphone with his pencil, smacked the

little WHY tag with his eraser, and watched it spin loosely around the neck of the microphone. People may grow to think like him because his thoughts are magnified, projected, lodged in their minds like a great logjam in that radio wave river of the heavens. He wondered how many people can swim in that river, how many even wade in it? How many can swim through the current to protect their own feelings, sentiments, personalities. How many are swallowed up in the currents, swept away from their opinions, to grasp at and identify with what is said, what our microphones project?

He shoved the swivel chair away from the desk, still staring at the microphone. He turned and walked out of the room. He walked into the restroom, ran the sink full of cold water, doused his hands in the liquid, and cupped them together to splash his face. He shook the water free from his face and stared into the mirror. The mustache was still red, still dark; the freckles had not disappeared with age. But the hair, the Clay red hair had changed. Silver was creeping into the temples. Streaks of grey could no longer be combed away.

"I am no longer young. My face has changed. But my voice, maybe my voice is eternal." He winked at his image in the mirror. He combed his hair.

It was opening day at the fair and Rachel Benjamin stood in the rest room of the sheep barn. She had been helping Lou McConnell with the multitude of papers concerning the various exhibitors. Everywhere there was the constant bleating

of the sheep; she could never adjust to it, even after years and years of hearing it, the voice, the simple innocent voice would not leave her mind alone. She shuffled through the papers, she got up and walked around the barn, but the voice was constant.

She saw her reflection in the dirty mirror. She looked more closely to see if the face was really hers. Has it really been so long, she wondered, has it really been that long? And the voice of sheep answered her question with louder and louder bleating. The years had come and gone in the quiet dust of Calliope, and like the crumbling bank of Calliope, she saw age everywhere in the old open air hall of sheep. Their voices cried out to her about youth long gone, about years long forgotten, about fair after fair after fair. Their voices were no different from those of their ancestors who bleated the symphonies of earlier fairs. They spoke the same words, chanted the same sad song about pure simple time; it leaped from their throats like dancing lambs in springtime.

Now as she stood looking at the hair more gray than brown, at the face more old than young, she knew what they were saying for the first time; she smiled to think that she had been so stubborn, that she had resisted so long their simple message. She whispered the message to herself in the mirror, watching her lips. She signed the message to the woman in the mirror, looking through the dust and streaks of time at the hands flashing the simple message.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of

death," she said, and she trembled to hear her voice, rippling in the little cement block room like a mountain stream of clear still water. She combed her hair. She straightened her blouse.

Outside in the cavern of a barn, with huge spreading beams and wall to wall wood, she breathed more easily, as if some oppressive burden had been lifted from shoulders accustomed, worn with the weight of it. She walked briskly among the animals, reaching through the wire like a child, patting the black noses, sampling the thick white fabric. Everywhere there was the voice, thick and moist like the late afternoon heat of the August day. Farmers in bib overalls and blue flannel shirts moved in the thick of the sound. The voices hummed around them like myriads of insects, swarming in the barn, but the straw hatted farmers heard no voice, they moved among the animals unmindful of the sound, lost in their own contemplations. They brushed, they shoveled, they opened sacks of feed and poured the contents into tin trays inside the multitudes of cages. They carried buckets of water. But they never knew, never heard the voices.

Rachel was laughing. She stood against the panelled wall outside the door that said "Lou McConnell, Superintendent"; she leaned against the wall, her head cocked to one side, and she laughed, long loud, bleating peals of laughter. She watched the sheep as they joined in her chorus, echoing the explosions of her throat.

Lou McConnell, his face creased with wrinkles and

screwed up in inquiry, came to the door. He turned to his assistant, the preacher's wife who so seldom raised her voice. He couldn't remember hearing her laugh, certainly never like this. He had watched the smile creep across her face many times, even when his jokes weren't funny, even when he forgot who she was and broke loose with an oath which usually lay dormant and was reserved for the most frustrating of circumstances. He pulled one corner of his fleshy old mouth into a wry grin and watched her. If he hadn't known better, he might have sworn that Rachel Benjamin was drunk. He started to laugh too, though he had not the slightest idea why.

Then the old man's eyes opened wide, and his laughter changed like a sudden summer wind, to a gasp of surprise. For there, stepping through the bales of straw and the metal cage gates were Claude and Judith and the baby. Lou had never seen the child, hadn't had time to stop by the little house by the feed mill to pay a visit. He raised both arms, like a caricature of an ancient cheerleader. He waved his arms at first the baby and then Rachel. He paused in front of her, stretched his face into an exaggerated grimace, and nearly lost his false teeth in the act. He waved his arms up down, but she looked beyond him to the sheep; she was laughing so hard that tears had started to form in her eyes. She rolled her head back on her neck to see Lou's twisted caricature, and she laughed still harder.

The old man took the baby into his arms, and held it as if he were handling a new born lamb. He reached to touch the luxuriant blond hair, stuck his fingers through the curls. His face twisted into the crooked grin. It was Claude all over again, the same searching blue eyes, the same bright pink face; the only difference was the halo of golden hair, the wolly curly abundant hair. The old man smiled into the infant's eyes. He felt the proud eyes of the parents upon him.

He carried the child to his grandmother. The sun cast late afternoon shadows across the barn. Rachel was silent. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Sheep were bleating everywhere.

She had spent too little time with the little fellow since his birth, and she was willing to baby sit when ever the chance arose. This hot humid August day had been his first exposure to the busy and frightening world of the fair. He was cranky and he needed a nap. His parents wanted to see a little of the fair by themselves, so Rachel said that she would be glad to take care of him until they came back. She nursed the child with his bottle of orange juice, and held him to her shoulder to burp when he drank too thirstily. Then as his parents walked hand in hand off onto the grounds, she took the youngster inside the superintendent's office and sat down in the big old rocking chair where Lou went to brood when too many sheep showed up for the number of pens available.

She rocked the child gently in her arms, marveling at the similarity in his eyes to those of his father. She kicked off her shoes, and sat absorbed in her study of the child's face; the chair caught itself up in its own rhythm. She rocked and rocked, letting the child suck again from the bottle. Rachel watched drowsily. Sheep sounds were everywhere, but their bleatings no longer disturbed her.

The baby drank mightily, staring into the eyes of his grandmother, sucking as much from her eyes as the bottle. She hummed softly to him. She smiled a gentle little smile when he curled in response to the sound. His eyes drooped in sleep. The myriad sound of sheep waxed warm in his ears. He snuggled against his grandmother's breast and was asleep; her warm moist humming calmed his sleep. She put the baby in his stroller, covered him with a light sheet, and busied herself with the preparation of a ribbon rack for tomorrow's judging. She took all of the blue ribbons, divided them by categories, and placed them on the rack ready for awarding. Then she took all the red ribbons and arranged them similarly. She loved the silky shiny ribbons and studied them carefully as she sorted the categories.

Somewhere in the distance a radio played.

"OOOOeEEE, a blue ribbon baby, oooooeEEE winna first prize, oooooeEEE a blue ribbon baby, the baby with the baby blue eyes, the baby with the baby blue eyes."

Rachel carried each of the racks to the little reviewing stand just across the aisle from the superintendent's office

and stacked them carefully, all ready for tomorrow's judging. She pulled little Claude Hunter III out of the office and locked the door behind her. A disc jockey was shouting the praises of a new Elvis Presley song. She walked away from the bleating sheep, and out onto the twilight sidewalks. Darkness comes slowly to Iowa in summer. Dark clouds rolled in from the southwest. The wind stirred the humid air, blowing popcorn sacks and soft drink cups and brochures about her feet. People hurried in and out of the little restaurants and tents along the sidewalk. Occasionally someone stopped to admire the golden haired baby, who slept through the noise and the wind. She took her favorite walk, by the barns, by the livestock pavillion, up the hill to the WHY tent. Each year the WHY programming from the fair had lessened, and the tent was now empty as the day faded; the clouds grew more and more ominous. Rachel pushed the stroller up the long hill to the high point of the grounds. There was a big sandy colored castle-like structure there at the peak of the hill. A big gold lettered sign on the front of the building said, "The Women and Children's Building." The letters were faded, and the building was becoming shabby with neglect; Rachel could never understand why so little activity had gone on in the building in the last few years of the fair. There were only a few scattered displays, and most of the rooms stood empty and neglected, doors open to reveal dusty rooms and broken furniture. There were ghosts everywhere, and perhaps that was one reason why Rachel loved the place so much; it was like

a giant Calliope, half deserted, poorly maintained, but proud of its memories, its ghosts. Finally she reached the cavernous open porch which stretched across the entire south wing of the building.

She was tired; her feet hurt as if she had climbed some great and wearisome Calvary. She stared off into the distance and saw the prayer tower silhouetted against the gathering clouds. She found a bench near the railing and tugged off her shoes, rubbing the arches, and cooing little throaty assurances to herself about the pain. Above the trees to the east she saw the majestic WHY tower displaying its metallic strength as if it too, were to be judged in the morning's activities.

The baby slept in the stroller, unaware of the crowds passing by the streets, of the noise drifting up the hill from midway, of the cattle and horses and hogs vying for attention in the huge barns below them. He did not smell the aroma of the manure and straw and hay, of thousands of automobiles struggling into the already crowded parking lots. He did not know that his grandmother stood in this forgotten building for women and children, that she stood now surveying him and all of the fair below her, like a queen in a decaying castle. She stood barefooted on the cool wooden floor, scanning the microcosm of Iowa that spread out before her, wondering once again as she always must, at the attraction of this people to its fair, at the flocking of the myriad moths to the brightness of the lights, at the coming together of so

much agriculture, the melding and merging of the state, poured, as if by some giant hand into the little pocket of eastern Des Moines. She saw many fairs spread out before her, parading before her eyes like so many prize sheep, vying for a winner's ribbon. She looked at the innocent sleeping child, and seeing his sleep undisturbed, wandered off into a side room where memories of the past slept behind ancient wooden doors. The stage was still there, but the steps leading up to it were broken. She glanced up a rickety stairway to a judge's reviewing stand, still encased with dirty glass. Once the lights had been bright in the room, the seats in the auditorium all filled with proud mothers and grandmothers and cousins and aunts. Doctors and nurses in sparkling white walked the stage and inhabited the reviewing stand to oversee and judge the Iowa State Fair Baby Contest. Iowa's state fair baby king and queen were chosen every year before the tense crowd of onlookers. The auditorium had been spotless then, the faces all brightly polished, the glass of the judges' stand shining to perfection. The tension mounted in the little auditorium, the heat crept around the legs and arms and necks of the waiting women. Photographers stood in the wings waiting for the judges' pronouncements. Faces turned pink, scalded by tension and heat, fans droned away in the corners, the aroma of manure from the barns wafted through the windows. Then a doctor, gleaming in his white surgical coat, bespectacled and dignified, stepped to the stage. His panel came down from their little observation post and took seats in the

front row. An August hush fell over the room, and only a handfull of those present heard the names of the blue ribbon children. Most of them heard voices in their minds, saw visions there, of their child, grandchild, cousin, named king or queen of the fair babies.

Rachel walked back to the baby in the stroller; his body rose and fell with the regularity of sleep which only the young and old know.

Far away she heard the bleating of the sheep.

"A little lamb," she said.

She stared at the baby, looked beyond his face to the WHY tent just down the hill. She remembered the day, thirty three years before, when she had come to this building, wheeled Claude about in his carriage, held him in her arms so she watched the baby contest, spent too much time looking at displays, and realized at the last moment that she had let time slip away from her, that she and Peter were going to be interviewed live in the WHY tent, and that it was nearly time for the interview. Jack Skelly did a daily "Speaking of People" show live from the tent in those days, and she and Peter had been invited to share their experiences in rescuing Claude and taking him into their family.

She had gathered the carriage in her arms and raced down the steps and onto the crowded sidewalk. She saw herself now, moving out into the crowd, pushing the carriage before her, the crowd parting in consternation. And there was Orson Shelton, Jack Skelly's engineer, shouting, "Mrs. Benjamin,

Mr. Benjamin, this way, over here, this way."

He was nearly out of breath, and his waves of long hair flew in the breeze behind him. His pudgy stomach heaved; he grabbed up the carriage. "You go ahead," he gasped. "I'll bring the baby. Go ahead; go on now."

It was thirty years ago and she was free, a thing of beauty in mid-stride, racing down the long hill, the crowd melding around her, her long dark hair streaming out behind her. She maneuvered in and out of the people like a radio wave intent on reaching its destination. She was strong, free, beautiful and young. More than one pair of eyes stopped to watch her race with time. Orson and the baby raced down the hill, darting around the crowds. His inertia had built to the fullest when he reached the tent. He tried to break his downhill stride, but couldn't. He grabbed one of the support ropes, and held tight to the carriage. He nearly pulled the stake out of the ground, and one corner of the tent started to sway with released tension. With ten seconds to go, he flipped on the switch for live transmission and handed the baby to his mother. He counted down to air time and turned on the mike. "Speaking of People" was on the air to wherever fifty thousand watts of power would take it.

A clap of thunder startled Rachel out of her remembrance. She pulled her shoes back on and eased the stroller off the old wooden porch onto the sidewalk. She ran down the hill, seeking the sanctuary of the sheep barn. A flash of lightning tore across the sky. She glanced at the tower behind

her, saw its warning lights blink on and off. She felt a few drops of rain, and pushed the stroller as fast as she could toward the barn.

CHAPTER NINE

The people moved in waves around the grandstand and poured off into the carnival and ride section of the grounds like a huge river. They were multi-colored and multi-shaped and they stared and smirked and fished in their pockets for money. Young men with slicked back hair and long sideburns tried to impress the girls in sailor blouses and short shorts. Babies screamed for more sticky candy, and youngsters with bright red and orange rings about their mouths sipped snow cones. There were artificial voices everywhere, whirling amongst the people like some outer space creature, tantalizing them with false urgency, stretching their imaginations into a foolish world of constant chance. Dancing girls with gaudy pink skirts exhibited long lean legs, and eyed the audience with suspicion. The huge circle reverberated with the mocking music, the bantering shouts of the barkers, the whirring, clacking sounds of the rides; the magnification, the exaggeration of sound was frightening. The boundaries of attention for the carnival visitors was constant sound. Each sideshow, each ride, each booth was wired for sound; the entire midway was encircled with coil after coil of cables, to amplify the importance, to somehow capture the attention, the interest, the pocket money of the fairgoer. In the confusion, the noisy, sweltering, dusty confusion many a foolish dollar changed hands, and the visitors to the strange world of noise and dust walked away with stained clothes, sticky hands, a few trinkets, an occasional stuffed animal, and considerably less money.

Still, the crowds rolled in, the farmers, the children from the farms and the country towns, and their city cousins from around the state. They all joined the throngs, fascinated by the bright colors, the tantalizing odors, but most of all by the voice of excitement, the loud, loud, sound of action. And in their midst, swept along by the current, were Claude and Judith Hunter. They held the transistor radio between them, its message blaring to their fingertips, but smothered to the ears of those who surrounded them by the majestic voice of midway. Claude knew exactly where he wanted to go. It was always the same place, and he paid little attention to the rides or the sideshows. Barkers shouted at him, attendants tried to catch Judith's attention, but the couple moved independently in the drifting sea of pleasure seekers. They went straight to Hawker Lee's Rifle Range.

They waited in line, watched marksman after marksman fail to shoot out the heart of the targets before them, watched disappointed sharp shooters shuffle off to other games of chance. Then it was Claude's turn. He reached in his pocket for the 50¢ and took up the gun before Hawker even saw who was at the line.

"Good God, Joe, if it isn't old Chromedome, back to take all our goodies again. And looky there, if it isn't his pretty little bride with him. Hey lady, don't you like a man with a little hair?" Hawker Lee stroked his beard. Judith was watching the heart; Claude was already shooting away the outline, clockwise as usual, calm, practiced, deliberate, as usual.

Judith held the radio. It was turned up as loud as possible.

"OOOOeeee, a blue ribbon baby.. OOOOEEEEEE, winna first prize, OOOOeeee, a blue ribbon baby, a baby with the baby blue eyes, the baby with the baby blue eyes."

The bright red heart fell to the floor; Hawker stooped to pick it up from the matted grass. He handed it to Claude.

"Here's a souvenir, Baldy. Go ahead take your pick of the animals. You must have quite a collection at home already. Come on Chromedome, hurry it up; we got lots more people who want to win after you made it look so easy."

Claude pointed to the big black and white dog with a blue ribbon around his neck. "Kluh, he said. "Kluh."

Hawker handed the big stuffed dog down to Judith's eager hands. She and Claude turned and ran through the crowd. They found a little restaurant that served hot dogs and hamburgers and french fries. They sat down at a little table underneath a big umbrella, which was whipping and swaying with occasional gusts of wind. Claude looked at the umbrella suspiciously, then moved to the counter where people sat on little bar stools. He much preferred to be where he and Judith could sit across from each other's faces and hands, and not be watched by others who didn't understand.

He put the big dog on the counter before him and told Judith how much he thought the dog was like his dog at home when he was growing up. He had told her about Kluh before, of course, but he loved to retell all of those special boyhood adventures. Finally she signed that she was hungry.

The busy waitress was accustomed to having people shout to her when they wanted attention, so she really hadn't noticed anything more than Claude's bald shiny head, and the big stuffed dog. Even if she had noticed that the two were communicating by signs, it probably would only have panicked her, because she had never tried to communicate with a deaf person.

So Claude took a napkin and Judith took a pen from her purse.

"We are deaf," he printed. "Please bring us two hamburgers, two Pepsis, and two orders of frenchfries. Nothing for the dog. Thank You." He showed the note to Judith. Her eyes opened wide, and she brought her hand to her face to cup a laugh. But she couldn't stop this laugh. It just struck her too funny. She shook inside, laughing from her stomach until her whole body shook. Then she exploded. The laugh was loud and shrill, too nasal to be pleasing. I sounded like someone intending to make fun of a laugh. Then Claude laughed too, his voice rising, his throat peeling out a thunderous laugh. Everyone in the little restaurant was watching. Some wrinkled their brows, others twisted their mouths. All tried to pretend that nothing unusual was going on. After all, there were many strange noises at the fair, and the carnival wasn't far away.

"Probably from one of the sideshows," and old man in green work pants and shirt told his wide eyed grand son. "They get some strange ones in these places."

The waitress came by and gave them both a skeptical look.

"Hey listen, folks, we don't sell any booze here. We can't afford the license. Winthrop says we can't afford it this year. We used to sell booze last year, but we can't afford it no more. So maybe you want to go someplace else. I mean all we got here is hamburgers and hot dogs and that kind of stuff."

Claude tried to read her lips, but he never was much good at that; besides, she held her mouth funny, like she was afraid her teeth were going to fall out. Maybe they were. Anyway, he handed her the note, and tried not to laugh any more.

She didn't read it; she saw the note and watched his eyes. She checked his hands to see if he had a gun. She looked at Judith.

"Look," she said. "This ain't funny. Don't try any funny stuff on me. There's too many people here. Somebody might get hurt. Besides, I already told you. We don't make much here. We only sell hamburgers and stuff; why don't you go down the street to one of those fancy places where they can afford to sell booze? I mean why not make it worth your while?"

Some of the crowd got up from their seats, especially those close enough to hear the waitress. She was rolling her eyes and wiggling her mouth to a fat man with greasy black hair and long sideburns at the grill. He wiped the sweat from his brow and reached for a pistol which he had tucked

in a little drawer. He grabbed it up and swung around to where Claude and Judith sat waiting. Claude grabbed his dog, and stared at the fat man. Judith grew rigid.

"All right, all right Baldy. No funny stuff. We ain't in this for our health you know. Mabel, you run down to that phone and call the cops. This smart guy ain't leavin here until they come for him with handcuffs. I suppose those three guys who knocked us off yesterday told you we were an easy mark, eh?"

The crowd drew back in fear from the gun. They stared at Claude and Judith and the big black and white dog. Half eaten hot dogs and hamburgers lay on plates abandoned on the counter top.

An old lady in a gingham dress fainted. The crowd drew back again, trying to decide whether to stare at her or the gun or Claude and Judith.

"Tell em to send an ambulance," the fat man barked. A flash of lightning ripped across the sky. The crowd looked up startled.

"Now then," the fat man said, his sideburns jerked as he talked. He tugged his trousers up with one greasy hand and picked up the note which the waitress had dropped on the counter. "Now then, let's see just what was so funny here, shall we?" He glanced over his gun at Claude as if he had taken Al Capone captive. "Let's just see what seemed to be so funny."

He read the note, and tugged at his pants again. He

wiped his brow. He looked at Claude and Judith and put the gun back in its drawer.

"Nothing for the dog." he said. "Nothing for the dog." Then he shouted to Mabel, whose fat legs were almost out of sight on her way to the phone booth.

Mabel MABEL, get back here. We don't need no cops. Mabel!"

"Come on folks," he said." ~~These~~ folks are deaf. These folks are deaf." He repeated himself to help overcome his own feelings of ignorance and stupidity. "Come on now, it's just a big misunderstanding. Sorry to bother you folks."

Then he turned to the young couple, still frightened and very curious. He wrote a note on another napkin.

He scrawled the note, trying to be as primitive as he could be. He capitalized every letter.

I AM VERY SORRY. WE WERE ROBBED LAST NIGHT AND I AM VERY JUMPY. I'LL GIVE YOU YOUR ORDER FREE. His hand trailed off the napkin. A crash of thunder frightened him and he jumped. Then he returned. MAYBE I CAN FIND A BONE FOR YOUR DOG. He printed in big ugly letters.

Mabel came back behind the counter looking foolish. She grinned a sheepish grin and straightened her hair. The fat man nudged her with his elbow and laughed. Two men helped the old lady to her feet. She seemed to be all right. Mabel took her a glass of water.

When Mabel brought the food to the counter, Claude and Judith carried it to the cash register. Mabel got a sack and

"No," Mabel said, trying not to be embarrassed. "Wilfred said to give this stuff to you since we caused you so much trouble." Then she caught herself and realized again that Claude and Judith could not hear. Judith had turned on the transistor and music from a rock station blared out into the little restaurant. Mabel tried again, exaggerating her lip movements, contorting her face.

"The food is free," she said. She pointed to the food in the sack and then to the cash register. She held up one hand like a policeman, and stuck out her lower lip, curling it over like a pouting child.

"No," she said. "No pay."

Claude walked to the door and stuck his hand outside; there were a few sprinkles in the air. He motioned to Judith and reached into his hip pocket for his billfold, drawing out two one dollar bills. Wilfred had joined Mabel at the cash register. Claude wanted to explain to them that he always paid for his meals, and though he appreciated their kindness, he still wanted to pay. But there was no time to write a note; it was starting to rain, and he didn't want to stay there any longer. He walked to the counter and gathered up his stuffed dog. He put the money down by Wilfred, grabbed the sack of food, and ran for the door.

Wilfred stood shouting. "Hey wait, fellow. Wait."

"I wanted to give it to you, I wanted to, we didn't know you were..." His voice trailed off. He ran around the counter and waddled to the door, staring after the young couple.

They were running up the steep hill toward the women's and children's building. He shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the grill. He tried not to look at Mabel.

Claude and Judith were out of breath when the rain came. They stopped under a huge old elm tree that was half living, half dead with Dutch Elm disease. Claude took off his shirt and wrapped the sandwich and french fries. He handed Judith the Pepsi. "I wish I'd ask for my change back." he signed to Judith. She smiled, but it was a wet smile. Her hair was already soaked, clinging to her head in huge wet strands.

"Come on." she signed. And they raced head down through the pouring rain, up the steep hill to the huge old castle at the peak of the hill. Judith took the stuffed dog, and tried to fit it under her blouse. She ran with head down, arms around her abdomen. They slipped and slid, but finally made it up the hill, and stepped into one of the long porches.

They shook off the rain and laughed at each other. Claude motioned that they should go to their special room. Along the dusty hall they ran, leaving a trail of mud from their soggy shoes and dripping clothes. They ran to the old deserted baby judging room, and climbed the rickety stairs to the judge's booth. There were two chairs and a little table, just as there always were. Probably the furniture had been undisturbed since they had come here the year before.

With the food still wrapped in his shirt, Claude wiped the dust from the bottoms of the chairs, leaving a streak of mud where the dust had been, and his shirt was muddied, too.

"Oh well," he signed, and sat down on the muddy chair. He unwrapped the food, and Judith handed him what remained of his Pepsi. The hamburgers were wet. The french fries were soggy; all of the salt had washed off and soaked into the soggy paper sack. It wasn't much of a meal anymore, but they were hungry, especially after the long climb in the rain, so they ate it anyway. Judith gathered the wet bags and wrappers and carried them to a dusty wastebasket. She came back to the table.

They sat in their own little world, remote, soaked by rain, but happy. There was no one to misunderstand their motives, no one to stare at their manual communications. Something about the room spoke to them, touched them; they came here every year, as many times as they could during the fair. They could share embraces behind the dirty stained window of the judges' stand and no one would ever notice, even when someone drifted into the lonely dusty forgotten world of the auditorium below. The glass was so dirty, so forgotten, so encumbered with years of dust that no one would ever think to look in. But Claude and Judith could look out at the rows and rows of empty seats and picture huge crowds there if they wished. Occasionally one of them would turn exhibitionist and dance before the window or stand at the window signing jokes to the invisible audience. But usually, they simply sat at the table and shared simple meals together and talked about how nice it was to be alone in a big old public building such as this. Sometimes they talked about

Calliope, sometimes about their duties in the sheep barn. Nearly always they shared adventures together, reliving the moments of the past in this dusty old museum of memories. Today they talked about Mabel and Wildred and that horrible moment of fright when the gun was pointed at them and they thought the fat man had gone berserk, they talked about the funny way Mabel held her mouth when she wanted them to read her lips. Claude said he was afraid her false teeth were going to fall out. They laughed quietly; the remembrance of what had happened in the restaurant was still very fresh in their minds, and they wanted to disturb no one, wanted no one to know that they were inhabiting their precious judges' booth. They kissed, forgetting Judith's wet hair, and soggy blouse. They smiled at the wet, bedraggled stuffed dog, dripping a huge wet muddy spot onto the corner of the dusty table where he lay. Their lips tasted like rainwater and greasy hamburgers. The dog looked as if he wanted to get up and shake his matted cloth hair. Claude reached over and shook him, sprinkling water all about the room. Two or three streaks ran down the muddy glass of the reviewing window. Claude thought that they were like old men's tears. He thought of Will Speck when Gracie died. He thought of Otis Voas who sometimes cried when he played the violin. Claude wished he hadn't shook the dog. He glanced through the streak left by droplets of water from the dog. Moving his head slowly back and forth, he watched the broken seats, the dusty chairs of the auditorium below. He sat rapt in his thoughts and his new

visual game for several minutes. Judith took a comb from her purse, and tried to straighten the tangles of her hair. She watched Claude's intent gaze, knew that he was lost in contemplation. Their life was good, and it had become so much more meaningful, so much more important since little Claude III was born. Claude was so proud, so protective; he was a very good father. He loved to play with the child, and run his fingers through the woolly yellow hair. She smiled, now, thinking of the baby, wishing they were with him.

But Claude was suddenly disturbed. He sat upright in the chair, his eyes large with alarm. He held his forefinger to his lips and motioned for Judith to be very still.

Three men walked into the dusty auditorium. They grumbled about the rain and shook off the water from their shirts and hair. Claude recognized Hawker Lee from the rifle range.

Hawker took a seat on the dusty stage; his two friends pulled down the fold up seats of two chairs in the front row and waited for Hawker to speak. Claude could see only Hawker's face and Hawker had too much hair in his mustache and beard for Claude to make out anything of what he said even if he could see through the dusty window. But something about Hawker's face made Claude very frightened. He had read faces too long to miss the cruelty, the greed that spread out on the face of the bearded man. Even in the dying light of the dusty room, even in the dusty dirty frame of the old judges' stand window, he could read the evil in the

man's face. He knew the face; he had read it full of disgust, complacency, even admiration, but this face, this bearded wet face was full of that which he feared. He wanted to protect his wife. He thought of his child. He thought perhaps Hawker was angry because he kept shooting his hearts out. He motioned for Judith to get down on the floor. Together they sat below the level of the dirty window, afraid to look out, afraid almost to think. Claude had never seen such evil greed pervade a face; he wished he was in the sheep barn, he wished he was in Calliope. He tried to console Judith, he stroked her, he touched her; he warned her not to cry because the men outside could hear what they could not. They stared at the dusty floor, at the plaster patch which had fallen to the floor. He traced little pictures in the dust. They waited.

Hawker Lee pulled his feet up beneath him, and squatted yoga like on the dusty stage. He stared at the shabby, dusty curtains which once had opened upon children's programs, on baby contests, on stage shows. He looked at the broken light fixtures dangling from the ceiling, and at the big spot on the ceiling that looked like a bat. He looked twice in the grey light. No, it was only where a big piece of plaster had broken free. He moved cautiously behind the curtain and pried at a loose board on the stage. Hawker reached into the opening and pulled out a big canvas shopping bag with brass handles. The bag jingled with coins and Hawker peered inside. The skinny blond man stirred in his seat. "C'mon Hawker,

we ain't got all night. Hurry it up. This place gives me the creeps." He shivered, trying to find a warm spot in his damp clothing.

A short balding man squirmed in the dusty seat to his left. He wore a green business suit and dark glasses. "Yeah, divvy up Hawker. I'm tired of this hick fair and this corn town. Give me my dough and you can get back to your two bit rifle range. I got better things to do than knock off carny shows-and hicks."

Judith was desperate. She could read fear building in Claude's face; she couldn't stop the crying; the tears ran down her face in big streams. She wanted to be with her baby. Claude had straightened up and was looking out through the streak in the window. She reached in her purse for a kleenex. Her finger bumped against the transistor radio; it blared into action.

"OOOOeee, a blue ribbon baby, oooooeeeee, winna first prize, oooooeeeee, a blue ribbon baby, the baby with the baby blue eyes, the baby with the baby blue eyes."

Hawker's eyes grew wide; he swpt the auditorium for the source of the song. He stared at the judge's box. He cupped his eyes. The short man turned in his seat and pulled off his glasses, the skinny man leaped to his feet. They all stood staring at the judges' stand. They could not move. Twilight was falling rapidly; darkness crept into the shadows. There was movement behind the dirty window. Hawker dropped the canvas bag on the stage.

Claude rubbed his hands together in nervous desperation. He wanted to say something, to do something, but he couldn't. There was only one hope. Run, run, run. To the sheep barn. Safe in the fold. The barn. The barn. Run, run, run. Don't look back, Judith, don't look back. Run for the barn, the baby, save the baby. You'll be safe in the barn, run, run, run. His hands were flying. He repeated the message over and over. Then he stepped out in the shadows and down the broken steps; the men crept closer, trying to see his face in the shadows. He pulled Judith down beside him, then they fled the room, the dust stirring beneath their feet. There was no time for questions, much less answers. Out of the dust they ran, silent intruders into the harshness of the rain.

Judith's purse came apart as she ran. She looked about in desperation. In one sweeping movement she gathered up the canvas bag which Hawker had left open. She stuffed the purse in the bag and ran. The radio blared forth its message from the bag.

"Watch it men, watch it." Hawker said. He led the trio around the corner. He shouted over his shoulder, trying to strain his voice over the rain and the radio and the running. "I know this guy, this Baldy. He may be dangerous. If he has a gun, and you give him a chance, your're dead men. I've seen him shoot. I've never seen anybody better. We've got to stop them somehow." He was trying to run and shout and watch Claude all at once. Claude ran alongside Judith, flashing a desperate message.

"Go ahead. Don't look back. Run to the barn. I'll come soon. I'll come soon."

Judith ran on through the rain. A few stragglers in raincoats or umbrellas stepped quickly out of her way. The three men clustered now behind Claude, who had moved off the sidewalk and onto the grass. He was running in zigzags down the grassy slope, trying to lose the trio of desperate pursuers. Hawker Lee edged closer and closer, intent upon capturing his fugitive. Claude was near the WHY tent. Hawker dived, and the two of them went crashing and spilling through the wet grass and clay mud, down the slope to the WHY tent, gaining momentum as they rolled. Somehow Claude managed to hold to his stuffed dog. They crashed into the tent together, bound by the force of their violence. The bright red heart that Hawker had jokingly given to Claude earlier fell from his pocket and was trampled beneath them in the mud. They hit the tent with such force that the heavy rope with its muddy stake attached came flying through the air. The tent collapsed beneath and around them.

Claude caught the rope and stake as it soared over his head, Hawker was on the ground now, panting in desperation and fear. Claude held him down and tried to read his eyes, but he saw only desperation there, mixed with evil. He stared long and hard, he tried to speak with his hands. He felt his hands tighten around the stake, still poised above his head. He watched Hawker's eyes move to the stake. The thin man and the bald man had disappeared down the hill.

"We'll get the girl, Hawker. We'll get the girl."
And their voices were lost in the rain. They had paused long enough to see the tackle, to see the collapse of the tent, but the girl was escaping, they had to catch her, she might talk, she might talk, and she had their money. They pursued the radio in the rain.

Claude saw Hawker's arm reach for the pistol, he saw it and it must have been a split second move, but it seemed like years. He flashed back to the eyes, the eyes full upon his own, filling now with hate and fear and evil, brimming full of desperation. Claude could not wait. He knew he could not wait. The anger, the fear, the desperation swelled within his chest. He wanted to speak, to say something, anything to let this man know how dangerous the moment was, but he could not, he could speak only with his hands, and his hands clutched the feverish, muddy stake. The rope swung like some giant pendulum, awaiting his decision. Hawker edged closer to the gun. He had it in his hand; his eyes still watched Claude, he raised the gun, slowly, slowly; he was on his back, the tent, the rope and Claude held him pinned to the ground, but now he had the voice of power in his hand. Now he could silence this threat, now he could end it.

An old woman with a pink umbrella stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. It was nearly dark, and she strained to see through the rain. She stepped closer. She saw the flash of the gun, heard the report; she screamed and screamed. Claude felt power surge through his hands; he plunged the stake

into the body, and stepped up in horror. He could still see the flash of the gun; he touched his scalp, felt the blood oozing from the wound. He staggered to his feet, sliding in the mud. In the grey darkness, he saw the gun fall, saw Hawker's eyes grow dim, saw horror contort itself across the bearded face. He saw the deep red shadow of blood creep out of the body, saw it flow over the flesh, the cloth, and find its way, mixed with the rain to the soil. He could not move. He was transfixed. His mind raced with thoughts and signs, but none of them made sense. He looked up to the huge blinking tower of WHY. The lights seemed to blink blood. He turned away and looked across the grounds to the prayer tower. The cross was abstract in the rain, blurred around the edges, but her could still read the JESUS SAVES.

"Da," he said, the word flowing automatically from his lips. He was afraid. "Da," he cried. The tears ran down his face, mixed with blood and rain. His head throbbed. "Da, da, da, da." he cried.

The rain fell in sheets now and Claude was soaked through and through. A little tinge of pain kept flashing from the place where the bullet had grazed his skull. He knew he should do something about it. The lady in the pink umbrella had run off to call the police he assumed. A little knot of people had gathered around; Claude felt that he should leave, that he should run after Judith to the sanctuary of the sheep barn, but he could not; he knew his responsibility to remain. From the distant lights of barns and the faded light of a

street lamp, he could see the dark stain of oozing blood on the tarpaulin from the WHY tent. He pushed through the little crowd of spectators, and stooped over the body. He tugged the tarpaulin away from Hawker's body, and pulled out his stuffed dog. A huge spot was imbedded on the dog's shoulder and neck. Half of the blue ribbon about his neck had turned purple from the blood.

Claude stared at the stake which had burned so hot in his hand; it had seemed electrified, now it shown cold and glistening in the rain. He knew that the stake had penetrated the body, that it was imbedded in the warm wet flesh of the clay hill. He rubbed his eyes; he wished that it all had not been so real, that he could open them and look at the painting of Jesus and the lamb just behind the pulpit, that he could look out and see Chrystal Gottschalk dabbing her eyes at the piano, that the communion tray with its broken body and shed blood could be passed his way, that he could look into the multitudes of cups, gleaming in the tray, each filled with bright red liquid, that he could reach down and....He rubbed his eyes and looked through the sheets of rain at the bright blinking red lights of the WHY tower.

They seemed to blink faster than usual. He turned away; he saw the prayer tower more clearly now; maybe the rain was easing up. JESUS SAVES blinked more rapidly too; maybe it was the rain, the distortion of vision. But the cross bore its message into the rain; it seemed to send waves of cross shaped signs through the night to where Claude stood. They

loomed large in his mind, retreated in the rain, then they raced to his side again. He knelt now beside Hawker; he touched the rope, then leaped back in fright, as if the rope were some venomous serpent. He gathered up his soggy, blood stained dog and ran up the muddy hill, the little crowd of befuddled bystanders staring after his soggy footseps.

At the far end of the women's and children's building, he found the bathroom. It was dirty and hardly sanitary, but it was his refuge from the rain and the pain.

He walked over to the huge barrell steel sink and turned on the hot water, watching the blood red rusty water pour forth from the spigot. His stomach turned. He looked into the faded ancient mirror. A huge jagged crack ran across the face of the surface. The mirror was smudged and stained, and it looked as though someone had thrown drops of water on it for many years, never bothering to wipe the surface clean. Claude stepped back startled from the image he saw there. It was revulsion he saw, not at the filthy mirror, not at the ugly bleeding wound on his head, but at the ghost of Hawker Lee which tugged and pulled at his eyes. The look which frightened him the few minutes before, now stared out from his face. He plunged his hand into the scalding water and rubbed it across the mirror. He refused to look up again. He took off his shirt, and stared at the mud and blood. He plunged it beneath the steaming faucet, thrashed it up and down in the steaming liquid. The blood would not come out, it would not go away. He plunged it back beneath the hot

stream. He glanced in the mirror, searched for Hawker Lee in his eyes, but saw only terror there. A stream of blood ran down his forehead, over his blonde brows. It splashed down over his cheek and chin. He wiped it with his moist hot hand. He looked again at the shirt, and realized that the blood would never go away. He took the hot moist garment, wrung the liquid away as long as his hands could stand, and applied it to the wound on his head. He started to chill in the damp basement; his shoulders shook. He looked at his image in the dirty mirror. He wiped the blood from his blonde brows. His face had grown pale. The hot cloth seemed to pulsate on his head, throbbing in and out with the pain.

CHAPTER TEN

Judith glanced back over her shoulder only once just as she lunged inside the gigantic open door of the sheep barn; she saw the flame of the gun, dived away from its motion, and felt its projectile probe deep into her shoulder. She spun out of the concrete aisle, and into the rack of blue ribbons which Rachel had so carefully sorted. The canvas bag flew from her grasp, landing in a puddle outside the door. Judith lay dazed in the pile of silky ribbons; her mind floated out in pain and horror. She saw Rachel running toward her, then toward the flash of flame; she saw her now standing in the huge doorway, framed by the cold dark rain.

Rachel had not been able to believe her ears. Out of the rain, and the grumbling thunder she had heard the radio, then the footsteps, the little whines of terror, the panting sounds of desperation. Then she heard the voice out of the rain.

"Stop, stop. I'm warning you. I don't miss. I'm close enough that I can't miss, even in the rain."

It was a split second, no more, until she was on her feet shouting, terrified into the unknown night, the unknown voice. For she knew the feet, glanced at a moment the bright young face, the long flowing wet hair.

She heard the body slide, slide, business suit and all into the manure pile at the edge of the hog barn across the street.

"Don't shoot, no, no, no, she's deaf, she's deaf. She can't hear. Don't sh..."

But it was too late; the bullet had done its task. She saw the girl crash into the ribbons. She heard movement in the manure, swearing, grumbling. Then two more feet arrived. She knew she was a target, a bright open target in the darkness of the night, and she was afraid, afraid of the kind of terror that flames out of the summer rain, that slips and slides in the miry night.

"Did you say deaf, lady?"

"Yes, deaf, deaf, deaf. She cannot hear."

Another voice cut through the night. The thin man picked up the canvas bag. He reached inside, pulled out Judith's purse, and heaved the contents toward the doorway. The voice of the radio soared out of the rain and into the barn. Rachel stepped aside and the voice died on the concrete floor. The transistor radio lay shattered; its tiny knobs staring into the darkness.

Sheep began bleating everywhere.

A voice whined above the bleating.

"The bald one... Is he deaf too?"

"Yes, deaf, always, deaf, always, always."

The voices were gone, their footsteps running, back beside the hog barn, beside the pavillion, up the long grassy slope.

Rachel turned to see what she could do to help Judith, but the girl was gone, gone down the concrete aisleway where restless sheep stirred in straw floored pens. Rachel trailed the little drops of blood to the north entrance. She stared

out into the night. She heard running footsteps splashing through the rain. A car door opened and closed; the motor coughed alive. Rachel cried. The sheep bleat ever more loudly.

"Dear God," she screamed, her voice nearly drowned in the wool and bleating of the sheep. She walked back to the little judging area, and picked up blue ribbons, splattered with blood.

The baby was crying. She rushed to him, picked him up, and cuddled him to her breast. She cooed little comfort sounds to him, and reached to brush his rumpled curls. She pulled her hand back in revulsion when she saw the blood on his hair and her fingers. She wept.

Two men ran out of the black wetness, and pushed through the growing crowd. In the distance, a siren screamed as if in hideous pain. One man, extremely thin and nervous, took the gun from the bearded man's cold fingers. The other man smelled of manure, but he wore a business suit. He searched through pockets, took out a billfold.

"Hey, what is this, what's going on?" A heavy set farmer in bib overalls, leaned over to look closer.

"His name is Hawker Lee, Monroeville, Alabama. He's a carnival worker. That's all you need to know Pops."

And the voices were gone, the footsteps disappeared over the greenblack grassy knoll of the night. Hawker Lee's driver's license was stuffed into his bloody pocket. Two

policemen ran down the hill slipping and sliding in the night. Their patrol car sat at the top of the hill, its red warning lights flashing out like bright flashing bullets. The rain was slowing.

Thunder rumbled all around the grounds.

Da, it said. DA DA Da Da dada.

Lightning flashed against the blackgreen of the clouds. The WHY tower traded signals with the patrol car. Two new patrol cars joined the first, their sirens screaming, their lights stabbing the ripe green night with long red flashes of bright red violence.

Two ambulances screamed past the old grey Plymouth as it climbed the long hill to the Women's and Children's building. Their lights glared out into the night; the Plymouth ground to a halt to let them pass. It stalled.

Judith cranked the starter, pushing the little button with fierce determination. She had to know what had happened to Claude. The car lurched and chugged up the hill, spraying a cloud of blue smoke out onto the wet pavement. She drove to the top of the hill and parked at the very peak. All around her were flashing red lights. The car turned pink beneath their glow. Her eyes hurt from trying to see through their constant flashing, but she stared out into the night. Lightning ripped across the sky; the rain had almost stopped. She turned off the windshield wipers, staring at the funny little button in the middle of the dash. Lightning flashed again, and she drew up rigid in her seat. Two ambulance

attendants were slipping and sliding up the hill bearing a body on a stretcher. She stared through the red glow, through the dim glaze of drizzle. She saw the beard, the bloody, bloody, beard. She looked away, and clung once again to her sholder, now almost benumbed. She glanced at the old castle to her right, and saw Claude walking toward her.

He held his bloody shirt to his head, but he was smiling; he was smiling. She reached for the door, but caught herself in pain; she brushed the radio dial, and it shouted out into the night. Her hand sought out the steering wheel for balance and she slumped over the wheel. The Mayflower was turned upright.

Claude opened the door of the Plymouth and reached to comfort Judith. Her blond hair matted with blood at the edges, her face drawn white, her blouse soaked red from shoulder to waist, she slumped over the wheel. He touched her tenderly, his hands flashing before her eyes. There was no response. He saw the spot where the bullet had entered her shoulder, touched the torn fabric, torn flesh, and stepped back, his hands frozen, his eyes fixed. The lights flashed and flashed around him. The WHY tower blinked its continual message.

And the radio broadcast turned suddenly silent. The voice of Clay Brooks boomed out into the night from the car radio. Thunder rumbled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt this program to bring you an urgent bulletin from the Iowa State Fairgrounds

A carnival worker from Monroeville, Alabama has been stabbed to death at the site of the WHY radio tent, just outside the Women and Children's Building at the fair. Police are searching for a tall bald man who fled the scene of the crime, and two other persons who may be involved. Stay tuned to this station of further information."

Thunder rumbled across the grounds. Claude raised his hands to the heavens, he stared at the tower, trying to read its magnetic message, but he felt only the metallic outpouring of red light, flowing in gushing streams to the hilltop around him, stirring and stirring and agitating in the night. Blood dripped anew from his head and down his face. He wiped it away with his shirt and looked across the grounds to the prayer tower, rising proudly through the night. Claude thought he saw something beneath the JESUS SAVES. He cupped his hands over his eyes and held his thumbs on his cheeks. Lightning ripped again and Claude could see the figure dressed all in white, standing below the JESUS SAVES, his hands lifted in prayer; the face was lifted up too, bathed in pink light, staring, transfixed at the WHY tower. Claude turned his own face to the tower, and turned again to watch a flash of lightning as it seemed to move from tower to tower; it was instantaneous, sudden. He raised his hands to the heavens.

"Da," he shouted. "DA,DA,DA,DA, Da."

His lungs poured the message out over the hillside. The ambulance attendants looked up from pushing the body inside the vehicle. They stared at Claude. Four policemen came

running up the hill, a tiny crowd of dedraggled bystanders followed, their mouths open, their eyes wide.

Thunder rumbled again across the hills

"DA,DA,DA,DA,DA, DA," it said.

Blood ran down Claude's face. He made no attempt now to stop it. It dripped over the hood of his old Plymouth, making little rivers of red beneath the constantly changing red flashes of light.

The policemen surrounded Claude, their badges gleaming like bright red hearts beneath the flashing light. They pushed him against the old car, pushed his legs apart, and searched him. One of them gathered up the blood stained dog. Another took his bloody shirt. One opened his billfold, and took out his identification papers. Another pulled open the door of the car and touched Judith's shoulder, noting the bullet wound; he tried to rouse her but could not. The seat was stained with blood.

"Mr. Hunter, we are arresting you in connection with the death of Hawker Lee of Monroeville, Alabama. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may and can be used against you in a court of law." A patrolman slipped a pair of handcuffs on Claude; his supple hands struggled as if the officers were trying to remove his tongue, or seal his lips. He tried to speak his innocence, tried to call for help, tried, tried, tried, but could not. Thunder rumbled again. A night hawk dived low over the car seeking an insect in the red glowing light.

"You have the right to remain silent," he officer repeated. He watched Claude's face grimace in its terror." You have the right to be represented by an attorney; anything you say man and can be used against you in a court of law."

They pulled Claude toward the patrol car, its light flashing brighter and brighter in Claude's distraught face. Lightning flashed again, and again. In the distance, far below at the foot of the grassy hill, Claude saw Peter and Rachel sliding desperately as they tried to climb the hill. Rachel was carrying the baby. Peter wore his black suit and white shirt.

"Datta," Claude screamed, "Datta, Damyata."

"DA.DA. DA. DA. DA. DA." the thunder spoke.

In studio C at WHY radio, Clay Brooks sat at the desk. There were tears in his eyes, he fought desperately to keep control of his voice. He watched the little red light in the corner of the room which would blink its vivid "ON THE AIR" message any moment now, any second. He stared at the microphone and its insipid face filled with too many tiny holes. Then the message came, flashing on and off, on and off in the little room. His voice rose in his throat. Somehow it came forth, poured into the microphone, and out into the Iowa night.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we once again interrupt this program to bring you this message from the Iowa State Fairgrounds. Police have just arrested thirty year old Claude Hunter Jr. of Calliope, Iowa in conjunction with the death

of a carnival worker at the fairgrounds. The dead man has been identified as Hawker Lee from Monroeville, Alabama. Hunter has been rushed to Des Moines General Hospital for examination of injuries and questioning. An injured woman was also rushed to local hospitals; it is not known if her injuries are related to the incident. Stay tuned to this station for more details."

The "ON THE AIR" sign died, its urgent message gone silent. Clay Brooks sat at the desk, his hand about the neck of the microphone, his head on the desk. Orson Shelton ran into the little room, his face filled with concern. He stretched pudgy old arms around his friend's back and sought to console him.

Clay didn't look up. He tightened his grip on the neck of the microphone, and fixed his eyes on the WHY tag at its base. His voice came strong, slow, calm.

"I was just a kid, Orson, I was just a kid."

The voice trailed away. Orson could hear the far away sounds of thunder.